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**Incarnation and inspiration : John Owen and the coherence of christology.**

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INCARNATION AND INSPIRATION  
JOHN OWEN AND THE COHERENCE  
OF CHRISTOLOGY

by

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KING'S COLLEGE LONDON  
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*To Sheila*

## ABSTRACT

Incarnation and inspiration are concepts which can be used to characterise two different ways of thinking about Christ. Although the history of doctrine suggests they are mutually exclusive, the argument of this thesis is that John Owen successfully integrated them into one coherent christology.

The underlying structure of his exposition was that of the incarnation, understood as the Son's act of condescension whereby he willingly assumed human nature into personal subsistence with himself. This assumed humanity maintained its integrity in all its operations experiencing God always as man. To the question, 'How did the divine Son act on his own human nature?' Owen answered that he did so indirectly and by means of the Holy Spirit.

The distinctive work of the Spirit is the establishment of the Church by the restoration to it of the image of God. The prototype or foundation of this work of renewal was laid in the humanity of Christ, which the Spirit formed, sanctified, empowered, comforted and glorified. Owen thus affirmed an inspirational christology within the framework of an Alexandrian interpretation of the incarnation.

The coherence of this account is tested with respect to four areas of concern. Firstly, can a christology which affirms the distinct operation of Christ's two natures successfully maintain the unity of his personal action? Secondly, is nature or ontological language too static to model the dynamic reality of Christ? Thirdly, is Owen justified in arguing that, other than in its assumption, the divine Son acts on his own human nature only indirectly and by means of the Spirit? Fourthly, does Owen's interpretation of the distinct action of the Trinitarian persons undermine the doctrine of the indivisibility of their external operations?

Finally the significance of Owen's christology is considered in relation to the Definition of Chalcedon and to modern theology.



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## ABBREVIATIONS

ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers, reprinted by William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1985ff.
AV	Authorised Version
Ed.	Edited
E.T.	English Translation
<i>Hebrews</i>	John Owen, <i>An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews</i> , 7 volumes (vols. XVIII-XXIV of 1855 edition of The Works of John Owen), Ed. by William H Goold, reprinted by Baker Book House (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1980).
NIV	New International Version
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, reprinted by Willian B Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1975ff.)
Works	The Works of John Owen, 16 volumes (vols. I-XVI of 1850-53 edition), Ed. by William H Goold, reprinted by The Banner of Truth Trust (London, 1965-8).

## PREFACE

Professor C.F.D.Moule gave the title 'Inspiration and Incarnation' to one of the chapters of his book *The Holy Spirit*. In his discussion of the theme of prophetic inspiration he was concerned that some sort of distinction be maintained between a consideration of Christ as one who was fully inspired by the Spirit in the manner of the prophets and as God incarnate in an absolute and unique sense. Faced with the theological difficulties involved in understanding and explaining the difference between these concepts as they are applied to the same person, he made the following suggestive comment:

...although it may be impossible to work these observations into a coherent system, it is more realistic to hold them together in a paradoxical statement than to force sense upon them by overlooking some of the phenomena.(p.59)

Moule betrays a certain pessimism about the possibility of bringing these ideas together into a coherent structure. If they do, however, signify two equally valid perspectives in understanding the person of Christ, does not our commitment to rationality compel us to carefully examine whether some level of theological integration is in fact possible? I believe that it does and the basic intention of this thesis is to examine how the coherent integration of these concepts might be accomplished.

It is to Professor Colin Gunton that I owe the insight that a doctrine of the Spirit is essential to an adequate christology and it was he who guided me to read the work of the controversial nineteenth century theologian Edward Irving. It was with some surprise that I discovered that a number of Irving's ideas concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in the person of Christ were remarkably similar to certain aspects of the theology of the leading Puritan divine, John Owen, who had written some one hundred and fifty years before him.

I had last read seriously from Owen's works fifteen years ago while working as an evangelist in the South African townships and was fascinated by the possibility that in his theology we might find a key

to the integration of the concepts of incarnation and inspiration and thereby defend the coherence of christology. The whole enterprise has been both theologically and spiritually stimulating and with respect to the goal of this thesis I believe rewarding, for it is my argument that Owen's christology incorporated these distinctive ways of understanding the person of Christ in a conceptually helpful synthesis.

I gladly acknowledge my indebtedness to Professor Gunton, my supervisor who, in his awareness that theology is an ongoing dialogue with the leading thinkers of the present and of the past, was continually able to encourage me to take seriously the work of this great seventeenth century Puritan. I am also grateful to other members of the theological research seminar at King's College, including Dr. Christoph Schwoebel and Professor John Zizioulas, who in our weekly discussion stimulated my thinking and made the whole task of theology appear both worthwhile and exciting. Special thanks are due to my friend Graham McFarlane, who in his research on Edward Irving, and through our ongoing debate over many late night cups of coffee, has certainly sharpened my own understanding of the issues. For all their practical help in making this project possible and for the encouragement to trust God in it, I am indebted to the ongoing faithfulness of Lizzie and Dixie Dean.

Finally I record my very deep gratitude to my wife Sheila, who followed her husband on yet another adventure far from the kind Zimbabwe sun, but this time with the added complication of two restless little boys who came along for the ride. My thanks then also to Kingsley and Courteney for only occasionally showing their friends how Dad's word-processor works.

## I

## TWO WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT CHRIST

*Incarnation or Inspiration*

## 1. Why did Jesus pray?

In the eighth century John of Damascus raised a question concerning the prayers of Jesus, "How then did it happen that our Lord offered up prayer in the case of Lazarus, and at the hour of His passion? For His holy mind was in no need either of any uprising towards God, since it had been once and for all united in subsistence with the God Word, or of any petitioning of God".<sup>1</sup>

The question is itself a reflection of where Greek theology had reached at the close of the 'Patristic Age', and John's writing, especially his '*De Fide Orthodoxa*' summarises for us the best of the Greek Fathers who had contributed towards what was now indeed widely accepted as the 'orthodox' faith of the church. But to many modern ears there seems something strange about the theology underlying the question, particularly when his answer is considered.

...is it not clear to all that He said this (the prayer in Gethsemane) as a lesson to us to ask help in our trials only from God, and to prefer God's will to our own, and as a proof that He did actually appropriate to Himself the attributes of our nature...?<sup>2</sup>

Far more natural to many today would be the following understanding of Jesus' prayer life by a modern author. "It is therefore more than probable that prayer was Jesus' regular response to situations of crisis and faith."<sup>3</sup> Here Jesus is understood as praying, not as a lesson in trust for the onlooker, nor to prove his humanity to the doubter, but because he himself was in need.

Our interpretation of what was happening when Jesus prayed, as with almost everything else that he did, is dependent on our christology -

our understanding of who he really was. It is apparent, then, that there is a significant difference in the christology of John of Damascus and of James Dunn, quoted above. One useful way of characterising these different ways of understanding Christ is by the concepts of incarnation and inspiration.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Incarnational christology

The determinative factor in John's explanation above was his belief that Jesus' mind has once and for all been united in subsistence with the God Word. This principle was held to be a consequence of the doctrine of the incarnation, that is, in its simplest form, the belief that the eternal Son or Word of God had become a man and dwelt among us. The doctrine had its source in the New Testament, particularly in the key phrase of John 1.14, 'The Word became flesh...' Its significance was recognised by the Early Church who gave it official expression in the Creed of Nicea, and used it extensively as a criterion of orthodoxy. In the period of christological debate that followed, the original concept was further elaborated and refined in an attempt to provide adequate answers to the new questions that were being raised about the person of Christ. A significant stage in this development was reached with the formulation of the theory of a 'hypostatic union' between the divine and human natures of Christ. This theory was affirmed in the 'Definition of Chalcedon' in the fifth century and became an integral part of the 'orthodox' understanding of Christ's person. We describe the christology that incorporates this way of thinking about Christ as incarnational, recognising that this was the form of christology held by John of Damascus.

John, with many other theologians, interpreted this subsistent or 'hypostatic' union of divine and human in such a way that, although he acknowledged the appearance of prayer and the growth in wisdom and grace in the life of Jesus, he effectively denied their reality. We are not arguing that this was a necessary consequence of an incarnational christology, but simply illustrating how easily it arose in this context historically.



For if in truth the flesh was united with God the Word from its first origin, or rather if it existed in Him and was identical in subsistence with Him, how was it that it was not endowed completely with all wisdom and grace?<sup>6</sup>

John is sure that to allow any growth in grace or wisdom in the person of Christ would be to deny a real incarnation, at least as it was defined at Chalcedon.

But those who hold that He progressed in wisdom and grace in the sense of receiving some addition to these attributes, do not say that the union took place at the first origin of the flesh, nor yet do they give precedence to the union in subsistence, but giving heed to the foolish Nestorius they imagine some strange relative union and mere indwelling...<sup>7</sup>

He is persuaded that if the relation of God to the man Jesus was a 'mere indwelling' there would be no difficulty in affirming his growth in wisdom and grace. This suggests our second christological type which we have characterised by the concept of inspiration.

### 3. Inspirational christology

By an inspirational christology we mean the interpretation of Christ as one in whom God has acted graciously through his Spirit, comforting and strengthening him in his spiritual life, equipping and empowering him in his service for God.

Such an understanding is reflected in a number of New Testament passages, most notably in the accounts of the descent of the Spirit on Jesus at his baptism, the explanation given of his exorcisms and the interpretation of him as the anointed one of Isaiah 61.1, in fact the very title 'Messiah' points to his particular unction by the Spirit. The account in Acts of Peter's sermon to Cornelius summarises the concept. "...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him."<sup>8</sup>

It is this type of christology which is suggested by Dunn in his book 'Jesus and the Spirit'. His starting point in understanding Jesus is that he is a man who experienced an intimate relationship of sonship in prayer:

...he found God characteristically to be 'Father'; and this sense of God was so real, so loving so compelling, that whenever he turned to God it was the cry 'Abba' that came naturally to his lips. We can also say, though with less confidence, that Jesus himself thought or sensed this relationship to be something distinctive - not unique, but distinctive...<sup>8</sup>

However it is his understanding of Jesus' relation to the Spirit which is of particular interest to us.

...Jesus' consciousness of the Spirit of God empowering him, inspiring him was basic to his mission...(his) experience of God was of a supernatural power compelling him to speak and to act.<sup>9</sup>

The bridge that Dunn finds difficult to build is the one that would allow him to move from this understanding of Jesus to the Church's traditional affirmation of divinity to Jesus. Constructing his christology on Jesus' experience of God, he interprets his divinity as the qualitative uniqueness of such an experience, "his divinity means his relationship with the Father as son and the Spirit of God in him"<sup>10</sup> - or more specifically, "...the Spirit was the 'divinity' of Jesus".<sup>11</sup>

There are two weaknesses in this approach. The first, as James Mackey rightly points out, is Dunn's "persistent tendency to look for the distinctiveness, and perhaps the uniqueness of Jesus in what must be considered subjective qualities of his consciousness..."<sup>12</sup> We simply do not have the access to it to be able to draw some of his conclusions. The second is that the 'divinity' that he seeks to establish does not clearly accord with what is normally understood by this term. There has been a loss of content in the meaning of the word and it is by no means certain that it fulfils the functions which the Church has required of Jesus' divinity, not least of which was to safeguard the status of him as the worthy recipient of its worship.

We are not suggesting that Dunn is opposed to the idea of incarnation or to a high view of the divinity of Jesus, we simply draw attention to the difficulty he has in making contact with it starting, as he does, from his concept of inspiration outlined above.

#### 4. Compatibility and the witness of tradition

Now this brief analysis emphasises the significant difference in the christology of these two men. In our discussion of John of Damascus we saw his reluctance, from the standpoint of the doctrine of the incarnation, to affirm the reality of either Jesus' prayer life or of his growth in wisdom and grace, both so essential to an inspirational christology. On the other hand, Dunn's approach suggests the inadequacy of the concept of inspiration as a basis on which to found a doctrine of Jesus' divinity, particularly if that divinity is to be understood in terms of his essential equality with the Father. In fact a suspicion naturally arises as to whether the concept of inspiration might in itself logically preclude such a doctrine.

Our interest is in the relation, and possible integration into one coherent christology, of the concepts of incarnation and inspiration. If we assume that the christologies of John of Damascus and James Dunn more or less adequately represent the two types of christology characterised by these concepts, we have so far only discerned a certain hostility between them.

That they are difficult to harmonise or integrate into one system is evident from the Church's christological tradition. For the history of Christian doctrine bears witness to the general growth, development and triumph of incarnational Christology within the church in both east and west till well after the Reformation. Alongside this is a widespread neglect or misunderstanding of the concept of inspiration within the central tradition,<sup>13</sup> and its promulgation outside that tradition only as an alternative to incarnation. Although both play an integral part in the New Testament portrayal of Jesus, it is only in a very few theologies that we see an affirmation of both inspiration and

incarnation and some movement towards their integration into one coherent theology. This pattern is best illustrated by a brief survey of some of the christological types that arose in the Early Church.

#### a. Spirit-christology

In a number of early Christian writings, including those of Ignatius, and Second Clement, there are indications of what has been termed a 'spirit-christology',<sup>14</sup> but this is not to be confused with what we have described as the concept of inspiration. 'Pneuma' is used by them either to denote Jesus' divine nature, or as an alternative expression for the pre-existent Christ. The former is evident in Ignatius' outline of Jesus' person:-

There is one Physician, of flesh and of Spirit, originate and unoriginate, God in man, true life in death, son of Mary and Son of God...<sup>15</sup>

By contrasting flesh and Spirit in this way Ignatius indicates that there is in Christ both a human and a divine form of being. He is not making a direct reference to the Holy Spirit. Justin Martyr in his exposition of Luke i.35 provides an example of the way 'Spirit' is used to signify the pre-existent Christ.

It is wrong, therefore, to understand the Spirit and the power of God as anything else than the Word, who is also the first-born of God..."<sup>16</sup>

This identification was common among theologians at that time, including Tertullian and Cyprian. As Kelly notes, "the all but unanimous exegetical tradition of Luke 1,35, equated 'the holy spirit' and 'the power of the Most High' which were to come upon Mary, not with the third person of the Trinity, but with the Christ Who, pre-existing as spirit or Word, was to incarnate Himself in her womb".<sup>17</sup> These christologies, although using the word 'Spirit' are clearly incarnational, and show no awareness of Jesus' dependence in his life and ministry on God's empowering through his Spirit.

b. Basil of Caesarea

Another theological type which should not be confused with an inspirational christology is that of Basil of Caesarea. In his major treatise 'On the Holy Spirit', the Spirit is closely related to the work of Christ in a way which superficially resembles the concept we have described as inspiration.

But when we speak of the dispensation made for man by our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who will gainsay their having been accomplished through the grace of the Spirit? Whether you wish to examine ancient evidence...or on the other hand the things done in the dispensation of the coming of our Lord in the flesh; - all is through the Spirit. In the first place He was made an unction, and being inseparably present was with the very flesh of the Lord, according to that which is written, "Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending and remaining on Him, the same is" "my beloved Son;" and "Jesus of Nazareth" whom "God anointed with the Holy Ghost." After this every operation was wrought with the co-operation of the Spirit. He was present when the Lord was being tempted by the devil...He was inseparably with Him while working His wonderful works...And He did not leave Him when He had risen from the dead...<sup>18</sup>

We see here a number of ideas that seem to imply the concept of inspiration. Basil boldly credits all that is done in the incarnate life of Jesus to the activity of the Spirit, which he understands to be inseparably present with the Lord's flesh or human nature. His account appears to suggest that the Spirit strengthened or comforted Jesus during temptation, and there is a clear acknowledgement of the Spirit's participation in Jesus' ministry after his baptism, particularly in his 'mighty works'.

Yet it would be a mistake to interpret this as an example of an inspirational christology. Basil's real concern is to uphold the divine status of the Spirit and in this context he does so by positing that "in every operation the Spirit is closely conjoined with, and inseparable from the Father and the Son".<sup>19</sup> Thus the key to understanding the

argument in the passage above is that the Spirit is 'inseparably present' with the Lord throughout his ministry - their operation is indivisible. The function of his argument is to demonstrate the equality and indivisibility of the divine activity of the Spirit and Son in the incarnate life of Jesus. It is not his concern to affirm that Christ as man was totally dependent on the Spirit in his relation to God.

It is not surprising then that Basil's christology is unaffected by the ideas which derive from inspiration. For example he is unwilling to concede any real growth in wisdom or knowledge in the life of Jesus and is forced to resort to one of the traditional methods to evade the import of Jesus' lack of knowledge in Mark 13.32.<sup>20</sup>

The theologians of the early Church seldom related the Spirit to the person or work of Jesus and when they did it was not necessarily in the form of what we have described as an inspirational christology. Outside of the orthodox tradition, however, there were movements in which the concept of inspiration was clearly asserted.

#### c. Adoptionism

The most significant example of these was Adoptionism, a term loosely applied to the heterodox theologies of the Ebionites and of men like Theodotus of Byzantium, and Paul of Samosata, which have in common an interpretation of Jesus as 'an ordinary man whom the Spirit had inspired rather than indwelt'.<sup>21</sup> In his 'Refutation of all Heresies', Hippolytus' summarises Theodotus' position.

[According to this, Theodotus maintains] that Jesus was a [mere] man, born of a virgin, according to the counsel of the Father, and that after he had lived promiscuously with all men, and had become pre-eminently religious, he subsequently at his baptism in Jordan received Christ, who came from above and descended [upon him] in form of a dove. And this was the reason, [according to Theodotus,] why [miraculous] powers did not operate within him prior to the manifestation in him of that Spirit which descended, [and] which proclaims him to be the Christ. But [among the

followers of Theodotus] some are disposed [to think] that never was this man made God, [even] at the descent of the Spirit; whereas others [maintain that He was made God] after the resurrection of the dead.<sup>22</sup>

This account of Theodotus' position indicates a theology clearly opposed to an incarnation of the Deity. It had little support, even in Rome where it was propagated,<sup>23</sup> for the belief that Christ was far more than a 'mere man' was deep-rooted, and the real threat to the catholic tradition during this period was rather from the docetic christology of the popular gnostic systems. What is significant for our study is that the main argument put forward as an alternative to incarnation should take the form of an inspirational christology. This reinforces our earlier impression that inspiration and incarnation, or the understanding of Jesus as both the receiver and the giver of the Holy Spirit, are two ways of thinking about him which have not been easily reconciled by the Church into one coherent christology.

This means that when a theologian did affirm the concept of inspiration within the framework of an incarnational theology, it is of particular interest to us to see how, if at all, he was able to relate or integrate them.

#### d. Irenaeus

Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, considered by many as the first great biblical theologian of the church, is well known for his expansive view of the saving work of Christ, often summarised under the concept of 'recapitulation'. The idea of inspiration played an integral part in this, for Irenaeus related our experience of salvation through the Spirit directly to Jesus' own life-experience and in particular to his own anointing by the Spirit.

Therefore did the Spirit of God descend on Him, [the Spirit] of Him who had promised by the prophets that He would anoint Him, so that we, receiving from the abundance of His unction, might be saved.<sup>24</sup>

This link is further developed in a rather difficult passage which suggests that the Holy Spirit recreates God's image in the human nature of Jesus, which in turn serves as the pattern for the Spirit's work in us. "...the Lord commending to the Holy Spirit His own man, who had fallen among thieves, whom He Himself compassionated, and bound up his wounds, giving two royal denaria; so that we, receiving by the Spirit the image and superscription of the Father and the Son might cause the denarium to be fruitful..."<sup>25</sup>

A major part of Irenaeus' writing was aimed at the refutation of the teaching of the Gnostics. One of their principal arguments was that Christ had descended upon the man Jesus at his baptism, thereby indicating that there was a radical distinction between the two. In response to this Irenaeus emphasised the doctrine of incarnation to secure the unity of Christ's person, but he was also forced to explain precisely what was implied by the descent of the Spirit on Jesus at his baptism.

For Christ did not at that time descend upon Jesus, neither was Christ one and Jesus another: but the Word of God - who is the Saviour of all, and the ruler of heaven and earth, who is Jesus, as I have already pointed out, who did also take upon Him flesh and was anointed by the Spirit from the Father - was made Jesus Christ...For inasmuch as the Word of God was man from the root of Jesse, and son of Abraham, in this respect did the Spirit of God rest upon Him, and anoint Him to preach the gospel to the lowly.<sup>26</sup>

Of particular significance here is the manner in which Irenaeus relates the anointing of the Spirit to the incarnate Word of God: - the anointing takes place in so far as he is man. Does so simple a suggestion provide the basis for integrating the concepts of incarnation and inspiration? It would seem that much depends on whether it is legitimate or meaningful within an incarnational theology to refer certain activities to Jesus Christ 'inasmuch as he was man'.

Irenaeus clearly does so and offers a precocious explanation of how it is that either the divine or human is operative in Jesus.

For as he became man in order to undergo temptation, so also was



He the Word that He might be glorified; the Word remaining quiescent, that he might be capable of being tempted, dishonoured, crucified, and of suffering death, but the human nature being swallowed up in it (the divine), when it conquered, and endured [without yielding], and performed acts of kindness, and rose again, and was received up [into heaven].<sup>27</sup>

What is particularly startling here is the affirmation of two distinct, although carefully related, principles of action in Jesus in the context of a theology which so strongly emphasised the unity of his person. However to inquire into the legitimacy of such a procedure is to raise questions which were only to surface in the christological discussions of the fourth and fifth centuries and to expect a sophistication to the concept of incarnation somewhat beyond that of Irenaeus. For by 'incarnation' he understood that the Son of God, who existed with the Father from the beginning, became incarnate and was made man.<sup>28</sup> In fact he saw no need to qualify his statement above that 'the Word of God...is Jesus', continually stressing that they were 'one and the same'.<sup>29</sup> The logical difficulties involved in making such a straightforward identification were not yet fully apparent, nor were the theological implications of referring certain experiences to Jesus Christ 'as man'.

In short Irenaeus did affirm both incarnation and inspiration with respect to Jesus, and by referring the anointing of the Spirit to the incarnate Word considered as man he indicated a possible way forward in the integration of the two concepts. However his understanding of incarnation is insufficiently developed to explain how it is possible that in that one incarnate Word the man, or humanity, was anointed by the Spirit while the Word itself remained quiescent. In fact it was some two hundred years later before the relation of the divine and human in Jesus became the central theological concern of the Church and the problem was clearly addressed.

During that time the general neglect of inspirational christology continued and the church failed to build on, or even maintain, the broad biblical perspective of Irenaeus in this area. How is this to be explained? It is true that until Basil's work at the end of the fourth century pneumatology was comparatively underdeveloped in all its aspects and so theologians were ill-equipped to handle the ideas involved in the

relationship of the Spirit and the incarnate Son. Yet the Arian conflict was surely also a factor in the Church's reticence to draw attention to Jesus' dependence on the Spirit. Sensitive to any suggestion of subordination, it would seem the Church simply passed by a doctrine which appeared to undermine the 'homousion' and which was already tainted by its link with Adoptionism. However, certain developments in christology in the fourth century led to the reintroduction of the concept of inspiration into the christological discussion and with it the difficult question of its relation with that of incarnation was again raised.

#### e. The Antiochenes

One factor facilitating this reconsideration of an inspirational christology was the outcome of the Apollinarian debate and the general acceptance within the Church that Christ was a complete man possessing not only a physical body but also a human mind and soul. For Theodore of Mopsuestia this was far more than the formal recognition of the presence of a human soul in Jesus. Rather for him it was an awareness that the experiences of Jesus were themselves fully human.

But suppose, as you would have it, that the Deity took the role of consciousness in him who was assumed. How was he affected with fear in his suffering? Why, in the face of immediate need, did he stand in want of vehement prayers - prayers which, as the blessed Paul says, he brought before God with a loud and clamorous voice and with many tears?<sup>30</sup>

This is reminiscent of Dunn's earlier comment that 'prayer was Jesus' regular response to situations of crisis and decision'. Now, where Jesus' spiritual experiences are recognised as being fully human, inspiration becomes the natural way to interpret his relation with God. It is not surprising then that like Dunn, Theodore had an 'inspirational' understanding of the person of Christ.

The man who was thus assumed by the Word...received in himself the grace of the Spirit in its entirety, while to other men he gave a portion of that which was his in its fulness....It was this

man...and not the Divine Word, that needed the Spirit to justify him, to enable him to overcome Satan and work miracles, to teach him what he should do; and for all these purposes he received the indwelling of the Spirit at his baptism.<sup>31</sup>

The 'man assumed' is here differentiated from all others by the fulness of his experience of the Spirit. By it he is not only empowered for his ministry but is taught, sanctified and strengthened in his own spiritual life. Theodore even understood Jesus' sinlessness as itself a fruit of the Spirit's work, claiming that Jesus "was always without stain by the power of the Holy Spirit".<sup>32</sup> The implications for soteriology suggested in Irenaeus are also apparent in Theodore's exegesis of John i.16:

Of his fulness, he says, we have all received - that is to say, it is of his abundance that we receive the grace of the Spirit which we are given....For through union with God the Word, by the mediation of the Spirit, he has become sharer in the true Sonship. We receive a part of his spiritual grace, and through this same (grace) we are made participants with him of adoptive sonship, although we are far away from this honour.<sup>33</sup>

We participate in that which the human nature of Jesus received through the Spirit. With such a clear exposition of inspirational christology it is easy to understand why he was considered by some as an Adoptionist and linked with Paul of Samosata.<sup>34</sup> What gave this charge apparent plausibility was Theodore's identification of the object of the Spirit's anointing with 'the man assumed by the Word'. This is a rather more substantially distinct concept than the related one of 'Jesus Christ considered as man', which was used by Irenaeus, and it places a greater emphasis on there being in Jesus Christ two quite ontologically separate beings, the divine Word and the 'assumed man'. Does his interpretation in effect undermine the idea of incarnation?

To put such a question is not to ask whether Theodore sought and established some basis of unity between the Word and 'the man assumed'. The argument by R.A.Norris that it was Theodore's intention to reconcile divine prevenience and human freedom in a single action,<sup>35</sup> and that he was able to do so in his doctrine of inhabitation,<sup>36</sup> is I believe essentially correct. Nevertheless the rather different

question which is of interest to us is, 'Does the inspirational christology, outlined above, exclude a doctrine of incarnation?'. The ensuing conflict over the concept of inspiration in the christological debate focuses our attention on the issues at stake.

Nestorius, who was at the centre of the controversy, followed the christology of Theodore in his emphasis on inspiration.

The Spirit formed in the Virgin's womb the man who was assumed by the Word, and afterwards came down upon him at the Baptism, and glorified him, giving him the power to work miracles. It was the Spirit, moreover, that made him terrible to unclean spirits; that made his flesh a temple; that gave him power to ascend to heaven.<sup>37</sup>

However, this understanding of the Spirit's ministry in the life of Jesus was strongly opposed by the Alexandrians.

#### f. The Alexandrians

What offended the anti-Nestorians was the concept, implied here, of the Spirit as an external or superior power to Jesus. They maintained, on the contrary, that the Spirit was his (Christ's) own and that he performed miracles by his own divine power.<sup>38</sup> Their argument is clearly expressed by Cyril of Alexandria in his famous third letter to Nestorius.

He (Jesus) talks of having been glorified by him (the Holy Spirit) because he used his own Spirit in the performance of great acts to show his personal Godhead; in the same way an ordinary person might talk of the physical strength or particular skill he has as 'bringing glory' to him.<sup>39</sup>

He anathematizes the alternative position put forward by Nestorius.

Whoever says that the one Lord Jesus Christ has been glorified by the Spirit, Christ using the force mediated by the Spirit as an alien force and having acquired from him the ability to act

against foul spirits and to perform miracles on human beings instead of saying that the Spirit whereby he effected the miracles is Christ's own, shall be anathema.<sup>40</sup>

Why was Cyril so opposed to the argument that the Spirit, as an external principle, empowered Jesus? The answer surely lies in the incarnational nature of his christology. Theologically well-informed, he realised that the earlier affirmation that 'the Word became man' needed qualification. For if God was immutable and Jesus was a complete man with a human body, mind and soul, as was generally accepted, the notion of 'God becoming man' was clearly inadequate, for there could be no real change in the being of God. Yet Cyril believed that the concept of incarnation could be maintained by affirming the ontological continuity of the person, or more accurately of the 'hypostasis' of the Son or Logos, with the person or 'hypostasis' of Jesus Christ. The two were in fact 'one and the same'. The immediate implication of this is that Jesus Christ, who was in his own person the divine Word, could have no need of any external divine help. It was for this reason that Cyril was unable to countenance the view that Jesus was empowered by the Holy Spirit.

#### g. Chalcedon

It seems possible, therefore, to interpret the christological debate that led to the Chalcedonian Definition, as a conflict between an incarnational and inspirational christology. Of course Theodore's christology is far more complex than a straightforward understanding of Jesus as one who is empowered and strengthened by God through the Spirit. The 'Word' plays a central part in his interpretation of Christ and is understood to be conjoined with, or united to, the 'man assumed'. Yet Theodore makes no clear distinction between the action of the Word and that of the Spirit on the human nature of Jesus and it is not apparent how he would be able to do so. It means that the relation of the Word to the 'man assumed' can itself be interpreted as a form of inspiration. His central metaphor of the Word 'indwelling' the man, contributes to this impression. In short the essential structure of Theodore's christology is inspirational. Its strength is its recognition that Jesus' psychological activity was that of a human,

which is reflected by, and inevitably related to, the continual need in his own spiritual life of God's strengthening and comforting by his Spirit.

We have already seen that Cyril's christology was of the incarnational type, its central emphasis being the qualified identification of the person of Jesus Christ with the Son of God himself, which he secured in his theory of 'the hypostatic union'.

Now, it is generally acknowledged that the Definition of Chalcedon was an affirmation of the positive aspects of both the Antiochene and Alexandrian christologies. But if we are to interpret it as the settlement of the conflict between an inspirational and incarnational christology, it means that both of these, or at least the conditions necessary for both of these to operate, were formally endorsed at Chalcedon. That this in fact happened is clear from the contents of the Definition. The vital interests of inspiration are upheld most notably in the phrase 'the characteristic property of each nature being preserved...'<sup>41</sup>, for an inspirational christology and the interpretation of the experiences of Jesus being fully human, are mutually dependent. On the other hand by ratifying Cyril's thesis that the union took place in one 'hypostasis', the major concern of incarnational christology is safeguarded. Now to recognise this inspirational dimension underlying Chalcedonian christology is to discern its dynamic and functional possibilities, rather than merely the static and ontological categories that have usually dominated its interpretation.

Although both sides in this long debate learnt to appreciate the strength of the opposing arguments and modify their own positions accordingly, there does not seem to have been a successful integration of the underlying concepts in any one coherent christology. Both Theodore and Cyril had approached the christological problem from one particular perspective, and their followers tended to do the same. It is small wonder that Chalcedon was considered by many as a compromise rather than as a solution. However, its apparent theological instability might well be simply due to the lack at that time of a coherent christology that affirmed and successfully integrated the concepts of both inspiration and incarnation.

## 5. John Owen

In practice the difficulty in holding together these two seemingly incompatible concepts meant that the church continued to emphasise incarnation to the neglect of inspiration, with a consequent loss of awareness of the full humanity of the experiences of Jesus, as we saw above in the christology of John of Damascus. It was only in the sixteenth century that a clear challenge to the doctrine of incarnation again emerged. The group known as Socinians, after their Italian founder Faustus Socinus, fled under persecution from southern Europe to Poland where they flourished. In the seventeenth century some of their doctrines were introduced to England by a Mr. John Biddle. The question he asked has for us by now a familiar ring.

What need was there that the holy Spirit should be given unto Christ, to enable him to do miracles; and an Angel appear from heaven unto him to strengthen him; or why should he so earnestly expostulate with God for forsaking him, if Christ were he, by whom the First Creation was performed, had a Divine Nature and was God himself?...would it be said of him that had the Divine Nature, that he did miracles, because God was with him, and not rather, because he was God?...would not the Divine nature in Christ, at this rate, be in the mean time idle and useless?<sup>42</sup>

The 'fact' of inspiration and its implications are put forward as an argument against incarnation. Biddle was a brave man to publish his ideas, for at that time a denial of the Trinity was a capital offence in England. He was imprisoned and his works burned by the hangman. Indeed the matter was serious enough for the Council of State to request John Owen, the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford to reply to his work.<sup>43</sup>

Owen, believing the truth of the Gospel to be threatened, was quick to answer Biddle and the Socinian theology that lay behind his arguments with a detailed refutation in *Vindiciae Evangelicae*. However, what is of particular interest to us is not merely Owen's orthodox defence of

the deity of Christ in his reply to Biddle, but some of the positive features of his own theology. Following the Socinian debate he went on to develop a christology that carefully incorporated the different ways of understanding Christ, which we have described as incarnational and inspirational. It is our intention to investigate his exposition of these and to examine whether he was able to successfully integrate them in one coherent account.



## NOTES to CHAPTER ONE

- 1 John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, NPNF, second series, vol.IX, III 24, p.70.
- 2 Ibid., p.70.
- 3 James D.G.Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, SCM Press Ltd. (London, 1975), pp.20ff. A more obvious example of modern 'inspirational christology' would be G.W.H.Lampe, *God as Spirit*, Clarendon Press (Oxford, 1977). However our intention here has been to illustrate the nature of the differences in christology that exists even among more 'orthodox' theologians.
- 4 Other analyses have been made of the two main christological types. Karl Rahner distinguishes between the 'saving history' type, a christology viewed from below, and the metaphysical type, a christology developing downwards from above, *Theological Investigations*, vol.XIII, E.T. by David Bourke, Darton, Longman & Todd (London, 1975), pp.213ff. William Austin's analysis is somewhat similar to our own, for he proposes that Messiah and Logos are complementary christological models; see the discussion by Ian G.Barbour in *Myths, Models and Paradigms*, SCM Press Ltd. (London, 1974), p.152.
- 5 Damascus, III 22, p.69.
- 6 Ibid., p.69.
- 7 Acts x.38, NIV.
- 8 Dunn, p.26.
- 9 Ibid., p.88.
- 10 Ibid., p.92.
- 11 Ibid., p.325.
- 12 James P.Mackey, *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity*, SCM Press Ltd. (London, 1983), n.93 p.275.
- 13 See Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, John Knox Press (Atlanta, 1982), pp.18ff.
- 14 See Berkhof, p.20.
- 15 Ignatius, *To the Ephesians*, vii, A New Eusebius, ed. by J Stevenson, SPCK (London, 1974), p.45.
- 16 Justin Martyr, *Apology*, ANF vol.I, I 33, p.174.
- 17 J.N.D.Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, fifth edition, Adam & Charles Black (London, 1977), pp.144ff.
- 18 Basil of Caesarea, *On the Spirit*, NPNF, second series, vol.VIII, XVI 39, p.25.
- 19 Ibid., XVI 37, p.23.
- 20 See Basil, *Epistles*, NPNF, second series, vol.VIII, 236 1,2 pp.276ff. Basil would not concede any lack of knowledge to Christ. "How can the Creator of the universe fall short of the knowledge of the smallest portion of the things created by Him?"(p.276) He argued that the Son did know the day and the hour, but with a knowledge that was dependent on that of the Father: "but even the Son would not have known if the Father had not known for the knowledge naturally His was given by the Father."(p.277)
- 21 Kelly, p.116.
- 22 Hippolytus Bishop of Portus, *The Refutation of all Heresies*, E.T. by S.D.F.Salmond, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, vol.VI, Ed. by Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, T.& T.Clark (Edinburgh, 1877), p.304.
- 23 See H.B.Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the Ancient Church*, Epworth Press (London, 1912), p.101.

- 24 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, ANF, vol.I, III 9,3 p.423.
- 25 Ibid., III 17.3, p.444. The key to this interpretation is the realisation that by 'his own man' Irenaeus refers to Christ's human nature. Kelly draws attention to Irenaeus' lack of an abstract term for humanity.(p.148)
- 26 Ibid., III 9.3, p.423.
- 27 Ibid., III 19.3, p.449.
- 28 Ibid., III 18.1, p.446.
- 29 Ibid., III 16.8, p.443.
- 30 Theodore of Mopsuestia, quoted in R.A.Norris, *Manhood and Christ: A Study in the Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia*, Clarendon Press (Oxford, 1963), p.204.
- 31 Swete p.260.
- 32 Ibid., p.80.
- 33 Norris, p.214.
- 34 See Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol.I, E.T. by John Bowden, Mowbrays (London and Oxford, 1975), p.429.
- 35 Norris, p.236.
- 36 Ibid., pp.211-234.
- 37 Swete, p.265.
- 38 Ibid., p.265.
- 39 Cyril of Alexandria, *Third Letter to Nestorius*, 10, Cyril of Alexandria: *Select Letters*, Ed.& E.T. by Lionel R Wickam, Clarendon Press (Oxford, 1983), p.27.
- 40 Ibid., *Third Letter to Nestorius*, 12.9, p.31.
- 41 The Definition of Chalcedon, *Documents of the Christian Church*, selected and edited by Henry Bettenson, Oxford University Press (Oxford, 1967), p.51.
- 42 John Biddle, *XII Arguments Drawn out of the Scriptures wherein the commonly-received opinion touching the Deity of the Holy Spirit is clearly and fully refuted* (London, 1647), pp.27ff.
- 43 H.John McLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth-century England*, Oxford University Press (Oxford, 1951), p.129.

## II

## INCARNATION

*The Son assumes human nature*1. The writing of *Christologia*

Dark days fell on the Puritan movement with the accession of Charles II to the throne of England. The reversal of political fortunes in the Restoration was mirrored by the changes that took place in the life of the English Church.<sup>1</sup> Those who were unwilling to conform to the Established Church were ejected from their livings and many who continued to preach were prosecuted and often imprisoned. John Owen, the former Dean of Christ Church and chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, worked tirelessly to aid his close friends and associates in their time of suffering.

It was during this period that he wrote his major work on the person of Christ, '*Christologia*', not intending it as a treatise for scholarly discussion, but rather as a message of hope to the world of political and theological strife in which he lived. "The re-enthroning of the Person, Spirit, Grace, and Authority of Christ, in the hearts and consciences of men, is", he argued, "the only way whereby an end may be put unto these woful conflicts."<sup>2</sup> He understood the individual's relation to Christ's person not merely as a central matter of theology, but also as having a direct bearing on the stability and peace of the realm. His description of this relation, though as always analytical and precise, gives us a glimpse of his own vibrant faith in him.

Unto them that believe unto the saving of the soul, he is, he always has been, precious - the sun, the rock, the life, the bread of their souls - every thing that is good, useful, amiable, desirable, here or unto eternity. In, from, and by him, is all their spiritual and eternal life, light, power, growth, consolation and joy here; with everlasting salvation hereafter. By him alone do they desire, expect, and obtain deliverance from that woful apostasy from God...By him are they brought into the

nearest cognation, alliance, and friendship with God, the firmest union unto him, and the most holy communion with him, that our finite natures are capable of, and so conducted unto the eternal enjoyment of him.<sup>3</sup>

Our intention in this chapter is to examine whether Owen's interpretation of the incarnation is an appropriate way of explaining the being or constitution of this person.

## 2. Christ as the way of our knowing

Where is the proper place to begin an enquiry into Christ's person? Are we to assume he is a man, as we are, and then determine from his life in what sense he is divine? Or is our task quite different, requiring us not to establish or prove his deity, but rather to give a coherent explanation of how God took the form of a servant and dwelt among us as a Galilean Jew?

Wolfhart Pannenburg in *Jesus - God and Man* argues that Christology must be done from below, that is starting from the historical man Jesus of Nazareth.

A Christology from above presupposes the divinity of Jesus. The most important task of Christology is, however, precisely to present the reasons for the confession of Jesus' divinity. Instead of presupposing it, we must first inquire about how Jesus' appearance in history led to the recognition of his divinity.<sup>4</sup>

John Owen was also aware of the significance of Jesus' historical appearance as the ground for all our theological knowledge. But he believed that it was a disclosure, in the first place, not of his own deity, but of the very nature and being of God. He based his argument on a conception of our knowledge of the divine being as one which is indirect or mediated. Let us follow his development of it from the beginning.

The Divine Being itself is the first formal reason, foundation, and object of all religion. It all depends on taking God to be our God; which is the first of his commands. For religion and the worship performed in it, is nothing but the due respect of rational creatures unto the divine nature, and its infinite excellencies.<sup>6</sup>

But the divine essence or nature is unknown apart from its manifestation to the minds of rational creatures, in the light of which they are obliged to give all honour and glory to God. Thus the immediate ground or cause of our religious response to God is the manifestation of the divine being. How does this take place? Owen held that it is mediated through God's outward acts and effects.<sup>8</sup> It is through what God has done that we are able to know and respond to him. Initially this took place in his work of creation, for:

...it was to express himself, that God made any thing without himself. He made the heavens and the earth to express his being, goodness, and power. He created man 'in his own image,' to express his holiness and righteousness; and he implanted love in our natures to express this eternal mutual love of the holy persons of the Trinity.<sup>7</sup>

So it is that the creation of man himself - with a rational, intelligent nature and a conscience indicating his subordination to God - and the creation of all other things, declaring the glory of his wisdom, goodness and power is the basis of all of our natural knowledge of God and therefore the immediate ground of all natural religion.<sup>8</sup>

Yet Owen believed that there was a general awareness among mankind of the need for a fuller or clearer representation of God. Although the heavens declared his glory and the firmament showed his handy-work, these things were misused and instead of leading men to acknowledge his infinite power, goodness and wisdom, they became rather the stimulus to idolatry and wickedness. John Calvin, whose approach was similar, argued here that it was through the Scriptures that this clearer representation was given.<sup>9</sup> Owen, however, emphasised that the mere external doctrinal revelation was insufficient and that there was need of a real exemplification or representation of the divine nature to

bridge the infinite distance between God and man.<sup>10</sup> This was done in the person of Christ.

He is the complete image and perfect representation of the Divine Being and excellencies. I do not speak of it absolutely, but as God proposeth himself as the object of our faith, trust, and obedience.<sup>11</sup>

All other things were produced by an outward emanation of power from God.

But this assumption of our nature into hypostatical union with the Son of God, this constitution of one and the same individual person in two natures so infinitely distinct as those of God and man - whereby the Eternal was made in time, the infinite became finite, the Immortal mortal, yet continuing eternal, infinite, immortal - is that singular expression of divine wisdom, goodness, and power, wherein God will be admired and glorified unto all eternity.<sup>12</sup>

So it is that the immediate cause of all acceptable religion and worship is the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup> Although Owen believed Christ's person and mediatory work are inseparable,<sup>14</sup> it is significant that his emphasis here is on the constitution of Christ's being and not just his message or actions. It is through him, that is through the historical reality of his person as the representative of the divine nature and will, that we have a basis or ground for our knowledge of and response to God.

But how, then, do those of us who are temporally and geographically separated from the life of Jesus come to know him so that through him we might learn of the nature and will of God? Owen held that it was by the Gospel. This is the 'objective light' by which the knowledge and perception of Christ is brought to our understanding. It is 'objective' in that it is open to rational scrutiny and discussion by believers and unbelievers alike. It becomes for us a spiritual knowledge, that is one in which we are able to truly discern the glory of God in him, as our minds are internally and spiritually illuminated by the Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup> It is, therefore, by means of the message of the

Gospel and the illumination of the Spirit that we come to know Christ and by him the nature and being of God. Nevertheless, the ground or basis of this knowledge of God is always the historical person of Jesus himself.

### 3. The context in which Christ is known

We see then that Owen granted epistemological priority to the person of Christ in all our theological knowledge. This does not mean, however, that we can understand who he is in isolation from God's purpose and activity to save fallen humanity through him. We cannot simply detach the discussion of his divine status from the great drama which includes the story of the world's creation by God, its alienation from him and its reconciliation to him through Jesus Christ. For, considered on its own, Jesus' divinity is an abstraction. It is made concrete only when understood in relation to the God of Israel and his redemptive action in our history.

Pannenberg's programme outlined in the quotation above suggests a christological journey that moves from humanity towards divinity, uncluttered by a framework of theological assumptions.<sup>16</sup> Yet by interpreting Jesus' deity in terms of his resurrection from the dead and the meaning this obtains within the context of a general resurrection as a central factor in God's revelatory purposes, the direction he actually takes is seen to be rather more complex. For Pannenberg presupposes the God of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition who reveals his divinity in the consummation of all things and by implication has done so in Jesus' resurrection.<sup>17</sup> Although it is somewhat disguised, he in fact assumes the being of God, his purposes and his action in revealing himself, as a basis from which he aims to provide adequate grounds for the confession of Christ's deity. The concept of incarnation is replaced by that of revelation but the movement is essentially the same, having its origin in the redemptive purposes of God and coming to fruition in the history of Jesus.

John Owen's method was somewhat similar though he was more explicit in his recognition of the link between our understanding of Christ's

person and of God's saving purposes. He certainly had little respect for any christology which was developed without reference to it.

That which was designed unto the eternal glory of God in this great work of the incarnation of his Son, was the redemption of mankind, or the recovery and salvation of the church. What hath been disputed by some concerning it, without respect unto the sin of man and the salvation of the church, is curiosity, and indeed presumptuous folly.<sup>18</sup>

To provide the context in which the person of the Son is to be understood, he sketched an outline of the conditions that led to God's redemptive action in the world and the requirements that were necessary for it to be effective. But he did so from the perspective of the wisdom of God, a wisdom whose highest purpose in the recovery of man is to glorify the divine nature in all its properties.

#### 4. The wisdom of God and the person of Christ

By considering the constitution of the person of Christ with respect to the wisdom of God, Owen was not suggesting we have a full view of God's mind or his purposes, on the contrary he was always ready to profess the unfathomable depths of the divine wisdom.

We can do no more but stand at the shore of this ocean, and adore its unsearchable depths. What is delivered from them by divine revelation we may receive as pearls of price, to enrich and adorn our souls.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless he finds here the key to interpreting God's redemptive activity as one which most fully manifests his own divine glory, that is the full expression of all the attributes of the divine nature.

We saw earlier that Owen held that the purpose of God's creative action was to manifest or express himself, in particular, his wisdom, goodness and power. He understood the divine goodness to be the 'communicative property' of all the external works of God. Whatever is good in any



creature is an emanation of the divine goodness. His wisdom is that attribute of his by which he guides directs and orders all things, according to their nature, towards his own glory. Power he understood as the effective property of God's nature whereby he effects and accomplishes what his wisdom designs and orders. These are the principal divine qualities made known in the creation of the world.<sup>20</sup>

It was, however, only in the creation of man that God was able to give expression to his righteousness and holiness. For he had originally made man in his own image, "that is in such a rectitude of nature as represented his righteousness and holiness - in such a state and condition as had a reflection on it of his power and rule."<sup>21</sup> Man was thus understood by Owen to be a bearer of the divine image in his moral likeness to God. His dominion and power on the earth are to be interpreted as a consequence of this image, rather than belonging to the substance of it.

God's purpose in communicating his image to man's nature was threefold. Firstly, through it he was able to manifest or make a representation of his own holiness and righteousness to his creatures. Secondly, it enabled him to give glory to God for all his other works of creation, which in themselves are dumb in that they can only declare God's glory passively and objectively.

They were as an harmonious, well-tuned instrument, which gives no sound unless there be a skilful hand to move and act it. What is light, if there be no eye to see it? or what is music, if there be no ear to hear it?<sup>22</sup>

Man as the bearer of God's image provided the hand to play the instrument; the eye to see the glory; the ear to hear the music.

Thirdly, being created in the divine image meant that man was empowered to obey God and thereby enjoy him eternally. Thus for Owen, the divine image in man is in fact more than a moral likeness to God, and includes both the ability to recognise and respond to the manifestation of his glory in creation and also the power to obey him and thereby to live continually with him in a relation of love and trust.

However with the entrance of sin and the apostasy from God man voluntarily defaced this representation of the righteousness and holiness of God. No longer were these properties of the divine nature given expression in our world. Neither could the full glory of the remainder of creation continue to redound to God for only man had been able to actively glorify him for it. Further, in defacing the image, man lost the power to attain the eternal enjoyment of God for which he had been made<sup>22</sup>.

For Owen, then, what constituted the most serious consequence of sin was the dishonour that was brought on the holiness of God through man's wilful spoiling of his image and on his righteousness as sin brought disorder and disturbance into the whole rule of God.

But does not this emphasis on God's righteousness suggest that there is a moral law higher than God, which he is committed to uphold even at the cost of his own sovereign freedom? Should we not argue instead that God's absolute sovereignty allows him to forgive or dismiss sin without respect to any conditions externally imposed by his 'righteousness'? Owen had little sympathy with this sort of approach.

It was not a mere free act of his will, whereby God chose to rule and govern the creation according unto the law of the nature of all things, and their relation unto him; but it was necessary, from his divine being and excellencies, that so he should do.<sup>24</sup>

God's rule is not alien to his being, but flows from his own essential righteousness. Divine freedom is, therefore, never a freedom to do or pass by that which is evil.

Here, then, is the context of God's redemptive activity. Sin and rebellion had brought dishonour to God's being, in particular to his righteousness and holiness, and through it man had become captive to by the power of evil. The task of divine wisdom was nothing less than to devise a way whereby this state could be redressed and a new and greater glory brought to God in all his attributes. It would be a free act of grace, for God's nature does not, from any internal necessity, require that he should reconcile to himself a recalcitrant world. Nevertheless it was eminently suitable to God's being that he should

redeem man, for in this work other properties of the divine nature such as his love, grace and mercy, unknown in the first creation, were now to be openly and gloriously expressed.<sup>25</sup>

It is clear that salvation must be of God. Man could not restore himself, for in defacing the image of God he has lost the power to obey God and live for his praise. Worse, he was unwilling to affect his own recovery. His fallen condition meant he was at enmity with God and alienated from his life. Although he often retained a fear of divine power, which might outwardly affect his lifestyle, he no longer had that love of divine goodness, which was necessary if he was to choose freely and wholeheartedly to return to God. He also had no means of making reparation for the glory of God which had been so dishonoured in his rebellion. For we remember that Owen understood the principal aggravation of sin in terms of the contempt brought to the holiness, righteousness and wisdom of God. This man was powerless to undo.<sup>26</sup>

What then is required in the redemption of man so that the nature and being of God is suitably glorified? Owen held that in the first place there should be an obedience yielded to God which would bring him more glory, than all the dishonour which has accrued from man's disobedience. This would mean a restoration of the image of God in our nature, not only as the principle which empowered such obedience but also as a new manifestation of God's holiness and righteousness in creation.

Secondly it was necessary that the disorder brought into the rule and government of God by sin and rebellion should be rectified. It is required that sin be dealt with and satisfaction given to divine justice in a manner which is in every way appropriate and glorifying to the righteousness of God. Thirdly the power of evil had to be overcome and Satan justly despoiled of his advantage over man. Sin was thus considered by Owen with respect to both its past ravages and its present power and he saw that both must be met and answered by God's grace if we are to be redeemed and his glory is to be fully manifest.

What then can we infer about the nature of the one who would yield this obedience to God, make satisfaction for the dishonour done to his holiness and righteousness and overcome evil, thereby effecting the

salvation of the Church? Owen recognised that this must be accomplished in the same nature that sinned or disobeyed if mankind was in any way to benefit from it. He must be our close 'kinsman' if his obedience is to compensate for our disobedience, he must be as we are and meet sin as we do if he is to be of comfort to us in our temptation and a model for us in our faith.

Yet clearly the work of a 'mere man' could have no influence on the recovery of mankind or the salvation of the Church. One who was man only could not bring to God a greater glory by his obedience than the dishonour that arose from the sins of so many, nor could he restore so vast a multitude to a condition of greater honour than had been held before. The life and death of a mere man, however exemplary, could not break the power of evil so that all things might finally be united in him and the righteousness and holiness of God be everywhere apparent. It was, therefore, required that the agent of reconciliation although being a man should also have a divine nature, that is, that he himself should be God. (Owen's argument here is considered in greater detail in our chapter on the 'Mediator'.)

In this state of things did infinite Wisdom interpose itself, in that glorious, ineffable contrivance of the person of Christ - or of the divine nature in the eternal Son of God and of ours in the same individual person. Otherwise this work could not be accomplished.<sup>27</sup>

With such an understanding of the background to and requirements for God's work of redemption it becomes apparent why Owen found the concept of the incarnation so fitting in explicating the person of Christ.

## 5. The appropriateness of the incarnation

We have seen that Owen held man to have been made for high honour. He bore in his being the divine image, expressing God's nature, giving glory to him for all his works and able to live with him in a relation of love and trust - a relation that recognised God's essential lordship and his own servanthood. In all his faculties, powers and senses, in

all that was given or entrusted to him, he was not his own but in every way a servant of his God and it was here he found his true humanity, his fulfilment, freedom and dignity. However, he sought to put aside this condition of service and obedience and attain self-sufficiency, and so have in himself and of himself both dominion and rule. He would be as God, that is no more subject to him or dependent on him. His desire was rather to advance his own will above the will of God and it is this which has led to his ruin, which included his loss of freedom, dignity and relation with God, even as he defaced the divine image.

Divine wisdom responded in a way which was both fitting and effective, that is, by the incarnation of the Son of God.

...for he was Lord of all, had absolute dominion over all, owed no service, no obedience for himself - being in the form of God, and equal unto him. From this state of absolute dominion he descended into a condition of absolute service.<sup>28</sup>

As Adam sinned by leaving the state of trusting service which was proper to his nature and attempted to attain a state of absolute dominion which was not his own, nor due to him, so the Son of God, as a second Adam, relieved us, by descending from that state of dominion, appropriate to his being and entering a condition of absolute service, which was not his own nor due to him.

And this being inconsistent with his own divine nature, he performed it by taking our nature on him - making it his own. He descended as much beneath himself in his self-humiliation, as Adam designed to ascend above himself in his pride and self-exaltation.<sup>29</sup>

Owen has at last come to the essence of the doctrine of the incarnation. The Son of God, to effect God's saving purpose among men, humbled himself and became an obedient servant and experienced poverty so that we who were poor might now become rich. As the essential image of God, he took human nature as his own and in it bore a representation of the divine image so that man might again share in it. In his own nature the eternal Son could not do these things, but although he was divine he was able to accomplish them all through his humanity.

To summarise, we have considered the redemptive context in which Owen believed Christ's person must to be understood. Man's condition he interpreted in terms of the loss of the divine image, but the ultimate motivation for God's redemptive work he recognised as the manifestation of the glory of the divine nature. This he believed was most effectively accomplished through the incarnation. For the holiness and righteousness of God were more glorified by the Son of God's condescension to service and obedience than they had been dishonoured by the self-exaltation of man.

Thus, the recognition that Jesus of Nazareth is God's anointed instrument for the salvation of the Church leads us, according to Owen, to the concept of the incarnation as the most appropriate way of understanding his person. However, before we examine what 'incarnation' actually entails and consider the coherence of the concept, we must face some difficulties that arise from the argument so far. The most pressing of these have to do with the person of the Son of God. Who is he? How do we know of him? What is his relation to the wisdom of God?

## 6. The pre-existent Son

Firstly, there is the problem of our knowledge of the Son of God. How can we use the concept of the incarnation of the eternal Son to understand the person of Jesus Christ when it is only through the life of Christ that we are able to infer the existence of this pre-existent Son? This problem has become acute in an age in which questions of epistemology exercise a virtual tyranny over the theological mind. Alan Richardson reflects the temper of our times.

We now understand (as previous ages did not) that an institution, an idea, or a theological viewpoint cannot be understood without knowing how it came to be what it is.<sup>20</sup>

Epistemology is held to be a determinative factor in the comprehension and explanation of a belief. In theology this has led to a shift of interest from the coherence of theological claims to detailed studies

of their evolution. The assumption is that the rational way to justify these claims is through an examination of their historical development. So William Temple argued:

If our faith in the revelation of God thus given and in the God thus revealed is to be a reasonable faith, we must trace the process whereby they reached that degree of understanding which made it possible to formulate, to propogate, and to trust the convictions embodied in the Christian Creed.<sup>31</sup>

What does this mean for a belief in the eternal Son? Well if such a belief is to be reasonable it is held that we must be able to trace through the history of the development of christian traditions the process by which such an idea came to be formulated. As our experience of the historical person of Christ is epistemologically prior to the concept of his pre-existence, the justification of the latter must be done in terms of the former rather than *vice versa*. The problem, then, with the doctrine of the incarnation is that it moves in the wrong direction.

But is the underlying argument valid? Is the reasonableness of our faith dependent on our understanding of the different stages of its historic development? In short, is our comprehension of the evolution of an idea a determinative factor in its justification? John Rodwell's unambiguous response is so out of step with the current assumptions of many theologians that it seems almost heretical.

...it matters not one jot for the legitimacy of a hypothesis how it came to be framed.<sup>32</sup>

What is somewhat surprising is that Rodwell is using an argument which has for some time been regarded as convincing by a number of philosophers. In his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty entitles one section 'Locke's confusion of Explanation with Justification'. That the two are in fact distinct becomes apparent as soon as the problem is unfolded. He quotes Wilfred Sellars:

In characterising an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state;

we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.<sup>33</sup>

Rorty is interested in why we should have ever thought "that a causal account of how one comes to have a belief should be an indication of the justification one has for that belief".<sup>34</sup> The problem is traced back to a confusion made by John Locke in his misconception of knowledge as a relation between persons and objects rather than as a relation between persons and propositions. A causal account might explain how a person comes to know a proposition but it does not justify the content of that proposition. Similarly, the examination of the development of a belief can provide no validation for its claims.

However, what is important for our present discussion is simply to recognise that there is a distinction between justification and explanation. Owen is clear that Jesus Christ is the ground for all our knowledge of God - his person as experienced in history forms the basis by which we can explain how it is that we have come to believe what we do. A quite different matter is the justification of a particular belief concerning Christ. One criterion he regarded as important was its coherence with respect to God's work of redemption in the world as a manifestation of the divine glory. If one grants to Owen the essential correctness of his outline of God's saving action, then the incarnation does appear to be an appropriate way of explicating the person of Christ. This is so, regardless of the fact that our knowledge of the pre-existent Son is inferred epistemologically from our knowledge of Christ in the flesh.

A second question that arises from Owen's outline is whether it is justifiable to conceive, as he does, of the incarnation as an act of the Son's volition. For he emphasised that God was glorified, not simply by the incarnate life of Christ, but by the condescending act of the Son in which he chose to enter that life by assuming the form of a servant. He emphasised that the glory of the Gospel does not lie in the poverty of Christ as such, but in the fact that though he was rich in himself, yet for our sakes he became poor. But is such an interpretation consistent with Owen's conception of the incarnation as arising out of the divine wisdom and purposes? Is there any room for the Son's volition? In short, have we any justification for an



interpretation of the Son's presence among us as the consequence of a free act of his self-giving love?

To answer these questions we need to consider Owen's understanding of the divine counsels or plans.

#### 7. God's eternal counsels

Owen held that lying behind all of God's activity in creation and redemption were the divine purposes or counsels.

For all his delight in his works is but in the effects of those divine properties whose primitive and principal exercise is in the counsels themselves, from whence they proceed.<sup>35</sup>

He takes seriously the Scriptural affirmation that there is in God from eternity a firm and determined purpose, which it is the Church's great privilege to make known through the Gospel. (See Eph. i. 9, 10; iii. 9-11) He understood God's eternal purpose as one which was not surprised by sin and which from the beginning had made provision for the world's recovery. It is in this sense that Christ's atoning sacrifice can be conceived of as having taken place before the foundation of the world. Here is the outline of Owen's argument.

In the beginning God had made all things exceedingly good, manifesting his glory in their harmony and beauty. Man had been made so that in him God might receive the glory that he aimed at in and by the whole inanimate creation. Yet he permitted the entrance of sin whereby this whole order and harmony were disturbed, for they depended on the natural subordination of creation to man, and of his subordination to God through moral obedience. Divine wisdom, however, was not surprised with this disaster.

God had, from all eternity, laid in provisions of counsels for the recovery of all things into a better and more permanent estate than what was lost by sin.<sup>36</sup>

This is the revivication or restitution of all things, the gathering of all things into a new head in Christ Jesus. Although the ultimate cause of these was the divine will, the "design of their accomplishment was laid in the person of the Son alone. As he was the essential wisdom of God, all things were at first created by him. But upon a prospect of their ruin of all by sin, God would in and by him - as he was fore-ordained to be incarnate - restore all things."<sup>37</sup>

So it is that all God's plans with respect to the calling, sanctification and salvation of the church were based or founded upon the incarnate person of Christ.<sup>38</sup> They were laid in and with him, and they were to be accomplished in and by him.

For therein was he 'fore-ordained before the foundation of the world;' (1 Pet.i.20;) viz., to be a Saviour and a deliverer, by whom all the counsels of God were to be accomplished; and this by his own will, and concurrence in counsel with the Father.<sup>39</sup>

We have here an indication as to why Owen prefers the term 'counsel' to 'decree' when referring to God's eternal plans. For there is suggested in them a transaction between Father and Son as distinct persons. He treats of this at some length in his commentary on Hebrews.

And these (the eternal transactions) were carried on 'per modum foederis,' 'by way of covenant', compact and mutual agreement, between the Father and the Son; for although it should seem that because they are single acts of the same divine understanding and will, they cannot be properly federal, yet because those properties of the divine nature are acted distinctly in the distinct persons, they have in them the nature of a covenant. Besides, there is in them a supposition of the susception of our human nature into personal union with the Son. On the consideration hereof he comes to have an absolute distinct interest, and to undertake for that which is his own work peculiarly."<sup>40</sup>

Owen is aware of the difficulties in conceiving of a transaction or covenant taking place within the one undivided will of God. Yet his understanding of the triune nature of God allows him to appropriate

distinct activity to the divine persons in the eternal counsels. In them the Son voluntarily undertook to assume human nature and accomplish God's purposes.<sup>41</sup> His conception of 'the eternal counsels' provides him a basis for understanding the course of the incarnate life of Christ as an outworking of God's determined purpose, grounded both in the Father's giving or sending of the Son into the world and the Son's complementary act of voluntary self-humiliation.

The incarnation is thus held to arise out of God's wisdom and purpose, but only as God is conceived of as Trinity and his purpose as a counsel or covenant. It is within this framework that Owen is able to interpret the incarnation as an act of the Son's volition.

#### 8. The agent of the incarnation

We see, then, that Owen held the incarnation to arise out of the divine trinitarian counsels, whereby within the undivided will of God the Son willingly condescended to fulfil the Father's gracious purpose of love to the world by humbling himself and taking the form of a man.

The effective or material cause of the incarnation, however, is God as Trinity.

As unto original efficiency, it was the act of the divine nature, and so, consequently, of the Father, Son and Spirit...As unto authoritative designation, it was the act of the Father. Hence is he said to send "his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh"...As unto the formation of human nature it was the peculiar act of the Spirit...As unto the term of the assumption it was the peculiar act of the person of the Son.<sup>42</sup>

Although all three persons are active in the event of the incarnation, it is the Son alone, the second person, who actually undertakes the work and is himself incarnate. It was particularly appropriate that it was the Son who should do so, for as we saw above, as man had by sin lost the image of God, it was fitting that this image should be restored by him who is the essential image of God the Father.<sup>43</sup>

Receiving his personal subsistence, and therewithal the divine nature, with all its essential properties, from the Father by eternal generation, he was thereon the express image of his person, and the brightness of his glory.<sup>44</sup>

So it is that the subject of the incarnation is the eternal Son, a divine person from eternity and as Son distinct from the Father. Unlike the plans he was to fulfil, his own divine person was not contingent on the Father's will. "His being was not a voluntary contrivance or effect of divine wisdom and goodness, his eternal generation being a necessary internal act of the divine nature in the person of the Father."<sup>45</sup> The Son, although distinct from the Father, was yet of one substance with him and thus eternally a full participant in the divine nature.

In this chapter we have been considering whether the incarnation is an appropriate way of unfolding or explaining the person of Christ. To clarify the issue we have drawn attention to a distinction, implicit in Owen's theology, between an explanation of how we come to know God in Christ, and the justification of a particular explication of his person. Such a distinction, we have argued, is both legitimate and helpful. It is legitimate because the manner in which an idea or belief is attained does not of itself provide any validation of its truth-claims. It is helpful in that it sets the christological enterprise free from its present bondage to the concerns of epistemology. It thereby allows us to use other criteria by which to judge the propriety of a particular form of christological explication.

The primary criterion used by Owen was that of coherence with the whole body of theological truth, arguing that our interpretation of the person of Christ must be consistently related to God's redemptive purpose. His exposition above is in effect an answer to the query, 'How are we to explain Christ's being if he is the one through whom the triune God reconciles the world to himself and thereby manifests the glory of his nature?' The answer he gave was: as the incarnation of his Son.

However it is also required that this way of unfolding or expressing the person of Christ is shown to be internally coherent. This involves a consideration of the following sort of questions. What is actually meant by incarnation? How is it consistent with what we understand of divinity and with what we know of human nature? Does an interpretation of Christ from this perspective accord with the Biblical testimony of his life among us?

In the remainder of this chapter we will consider, therefore, Owen's defence of the internal coherence of the concept of the incarnation as a way of understanding the person of Christ. The issues involved, which include those of the nature of Christ's divinity and humanity and the relation between them, were of central concern to the Early Church, and it is around these matters that most of the great theological battles of the day raged. One consequence of having many of the finest minds of the time engaged in these controversies is that precise and therefore technical concepts and language were formulated to understand and clarify the complex issues involved. Owen, who was in continual dialogue with this tradition, consequently found it necessary to make some use of this terminology and the ideas that are implied in it in order to do justice to the subject.

## 9. The Word became flesh

*Kai ho logos sarx egeneto.* How are we to interpret this deceptively simple statement? Owen has already identified its subject as God's eternal Son, who fully participates in the divine nature. Now if there is a qualitative distinction between the creator and the creature, between human and divine nature, are we logically compelled to concede some sort of metamorphosis as taking place in the divine being, some form of change or transformation of the divine nature into that of the creature?

The orthodox tradition has generally avoided any hint of this kind of change in the Son's divine being. In the nineteenth century, however, a number of theologians developed the concept of 'kenosis' which had earlier been applied by some Lutheran scholars to Christ's humanity,

and argued for a real 'self-emptying' of the divine nature in the incarnation. Writing at the end of the century Richard Ottley in *The Doctrine of the Incarnation* represents their argument.

But we believe he did "become poor" in such a sense that He voluntarily laid aside the exercise of those attributes of Deity that would have hindered a real human experience.<sup>46</sup>

However the theological problems involved in this concept were soon seen by many to be insuperable. Pannenberg draws our attention to some of them.

Yet apart from the question of how he rules the world as Logos in the meantime, the opposite objection immediately arises here: a man on whose will it depends to be almighty, omniscient, and omnipresent would be "simply an apparent man, not a real man"....The *vere homo* is achieved only proportionately to subtractions from the *vere deus*.<sup>47</sup>

Owen was careful to insist that in condescending to take human form, the Son experienced no change or alteration in his divine nature. Rather it remained the same in him "in all its essential properties, actings and blessedness as it was from eternity."<sup>48</sup> He perceived that the presupposition underlying the argument for the limitation of the divine attributes of the Word was a monophysite conception of Christ's person.

Eutyches and those that followed him of old conceived that the two natures of Christ, the divine and the human, were mixed and compounded, as it were into one. And this could not be without an alteration in the divine nature, for it would be made to be essentially what it was not...<sup>49</sup>

It would seem that as long as Christ is viewed as having one integrated nature, the doctrine of the incarnation will inevitably be interpreted either docetically or as involving a radical limitation of the divine nature, as suggested in the kenotic theory.

If Owen refused to interpret the incarnation in terms of a limitation

of divinity how did he understand Phil.ii.6,7?

...but made himself nothing (*ekenosen*), taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.(NIV)

He held this 'humbling' to imply, among other things, a veiling of the glory of the divine nature in human form, so that there was no appearance or outward manifestation of it. "The world hereon was so far from looking on him as the true God, that it believed him not to be a good man."<sup>50</sup>

In his exposition, therefore, he insists that nothing was lost to the divine nature, nevertheless the incarnation did result in something new. Owen was particularly careful in the form of words he chose to describe this.

This Word was made flesh, not by any change of his own nature or essence, not by a transubstantiation of the divine nature into the human, not by ceasing to be what he was, but by becoming what he was not, in taking our nature to his own, to be his own, whereby he dwelt among us."<sup>51</sup>

Some of the Fathers, including Cyril of Alexandria, spoke of this as a 'natural union' or a 'union by composition'. Owen believed the latter expression to be misleading. For "because there neither was nor can be any composition, properly so called, of the divine and human natures, and because the Son of God was a perfect person before his incarnation, wherein he remained what he was, and was made what he was not, the expression hath been forsaken and avoided; the union being better expressed by the assumption of a substantial adjunct, or the human nature into personal subsistence with the Son of God..."<sup>52</sup>

We see then that he preferred to describe the incarnation as the Son's 'taking' or 'assuming' of human nature. Before we consider this further, it is important to notice that although Owen was insistent that the Son never ceased to be what he was, he did nevertheless acknowledge that in the incarnation the Son became something that he was not before. The person of the incarnate Christ was not to be identified without qualification with the eternal Son.

## 10. The assumption of human nature

Owen held that 'flesh', although scriptural, was an inadequate term to use in relation to the incarnation, for it could be interpreted as merely the physical aspect of man, to the exclusion of his mind or soul. 'Human nature' was therefore preferred as a more inclusive concept, which when ascribed to Christ adequately safeguarded his being as one which was fully human. Thus to affirm a human nature of Christ was simply to affirm his full and complete humanity.

And he is therefore a true and perfect man: for no more is required to make a complete and perfect man but the entire nature of man subsisting.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless Owen was quite clear that it was not a man that the Son assumed or took to himself but human nature. What is meant by this distinction and why was it so important? It is helpful to consider the nature of the union that arises if it is maintained that the Son of God assumed or took to himself a particular man. The union would be one in which the Son was in some way related or inseparably united to this man, but he would not himself 'be' a man, or equivalently he would not himself have a human nature.

For if he had by any way or means taken the person of a man to be united unto him, in the strictest union that two persons are capable of, a divine and a human, the nature had still been the nature of that other person, and not his own.<sup>54</sup>

But Owen's understanding of the incarnation required that the incarnate Son was himself a complete man, that he had a human body, mind and soul, in short that he had all that was requisite to being fully human. This is what the concept of the Son's assumption of human nature was meant to secure and this is why it was important to make a distinction between 'human nature' and 'a particular man'.



## 11. Anhypostasia

However, to conceptualise the nature of this distinction, Owen in accordance with the general practice of the tradition, had recourse to an essentially Aristotelian theory of the relation of the particular to the universal. The Greek word 'hypostasis' (often translated 'person') was used to describe a concrete and distinct, individual entity, separable from all others of its class. According to the theory 'a particular man' was understood to be human nature subsisting or existing in a distinct 'hypostasis'. Now applying this analysis to Christ's person, it was held that his human nature, considered on its own, was without 'hypostasis'.

In itself it is 'anhypostatos', - that which hath not a subsistence of its own, which should give it individuation and distinction from the same nature in any other person. But it hath its subsistence in the person (or 'hypostasis') of the Son, which thereby is its own.<sup>55</sup>

In short, Christ's human nature considered on its own was not a distinct individual man. The corollary to this was that in being assumed, the human nature had its 'hypostasis' in the 'hypostasis' of the Son.<sup>56</sup> This meant that the incarnate Son was indeed a concrete and particular man. We see then that the function of the theory of 'anhypostasia' was used by Owen to conceptualise the distinction between Christ's human nature and a self-subsisting man and so safeguard the belief that the Son of God as incarnate had his own human nature, that is, that he himself became truly man. This was an alternative to the view that the Son was in some way externally related to a man who was quite other than himself, a view that would imply either a multiplicity or mixture of persons in Jesus Christ.<sup>57</sup>

The adequacy of such an analysis of being and the legitimacy of the particular use that has been made of it with respect to the Christological discussion in the Church has been widely questioned.<sup>58</sup> However it is not necessary to interpret the concept of 'anhypostasia' as implying that some human element, such as a psychological centre of experience, was missing from Christ's humanity, or that he was man in a

generic or inclusive sense but did not exist as a particular or distinct man.<sup>80</sup>

In the first place, as we saw above, 'hypostasis' is not to be simply identified with the modern understanding of the word 'person' or 'personality', it is rather a metaphysical concept that refers to individuation. Secondly, to assert of Christ that he has a human nature is to affirm that he has all the attributes of humanity: physical, mental, psychological and spiritual. The human nature of Christ is therefore not a nature that lacks any human attributes. It has its own existence, that is it is 'hypostasised', in being assumed by the Son. This idea is generally known as 'enhypostasis' and it means that the the incarnate Christ is a man as we are. Thirdly Owen is not suggesting that Christ's human nature is in some sense universal. John McIntyre in *The Shape of Christology* summarised what has been a widely held conception regarding Christ's humanity.

It is important to acknowledge the universality of Christ's human nature so that all men may share in the benefits of the atonement...<sup>81</sup>

Owen, however, does not hold that the human nature of Christ exists as some sort of ideal or Platonic reality, which incorporates all mankind, and thereby accounts for the universal efficacy of the incarnation.<sup>81</sup> Rather he is here thoroughly Aristotelian, holding that human nature exists only as it is particularised or hypostasised in individual men and women. Jesus Christ is therefore one, and only one, distinct human person.

To summarise, the concept of 'anhypostasia' was used by Owen as a way of distinguishing between 'human nature' as a universal concept which has no reality outside its manifestation in particular men and women, and as the concrete expression of it in an specific person. The Son of God did not unite himself to a man, that is to a particular expression of human nature, rather his taking to himself of anhypostatic human nature meant that it only came to concrete expression in himself.<sup>82</sup>

In Christ, therefore, we are not strictly speaking considering the

union of two already existing entities - God and a man. Rather our concern is to explicate how one entity or 'hypostasis' operates in two distinct natures.

## 12. The hypostatic union

The union resulting from this assumption by the Son of human nature into subsistence with himself was generally termed a hypostatic union in that it took place in the one 'hypostasis' or person of the Son. Owen described it as a substantial rather than an accidental union,<sup>83</sup> meaning that it was a unity of the essence of the natures rather than merely an external relation between them.

In expounding the hypostatic union his central concern was to show how distinct this relation was from any other relation which may exist between God and believers, or between God and any other creature.<sup>84</sup> The Socinians, who were contemporaries of Owen, held that it was only in degree that Christ's relation with God differed from that of believers. He summarises their argument.

The eternal Word was so united unto the man Christ Jesus, as that thereby he was exalted inconceivably above all other men, though ever so holy, and had greater communications from God than any of them. Wherefore he was on many accounts the Son of God in a peculiar manner, and, by a communication of names, is called God also.<sup>85</sup>

Taking Nestorius to have proposed a position similar to the Socinians, Owen considered the five basic descriptions which he gave of the nature of the presence of the Son of God with the man Christ Jesus and responded to each of them in turn.

a. The Son of God was present with the man Christ Jesus 'by inhabitation' as a man dwells in a house or ship to rule over it. He dwelt in him as a temple. Owen conceded that this was true of Christ particularly with respect to that fulness of the Spirit whereby God was with him and in him. Yet the Scripture testifies

that in him dwelt 'all the fulness of the Godhead bodily' Col.2.9. He believed 'bodily' was equivalent to 'substantially' which is unique to Christ and explicable only in terms of the Word's assumption of human nature.

b. Nestorius allowed an especial presence by 'a union of affections' as is between intimate friends. The soul of God rested always in that man, in him was he well pleased: and he was wholly given up in his affections unto God. Although Owen acknowledged this to be true, he was quick to point out that the man Christ Jesus consistently relates to the Father and not to the Word and so this does not help us to understand Jesus' relation or conjunction to the Word.

c. Nestorius held the union to be 'by way of dignity and honour'. For this conjunction is such, as that whatever honour is given unto the Son of God is also to be given unto the Son of man. Owen believed that apart from a substantial union any ascription of divine honour to the man Jesus was idolatrous.

d. Nestorius asserted that it lay in the 'consent and agreement' that was between the will of God and the will of the man Christ Jesus. Owen responded by showing that there was nothing unique in this for the angels in heaven perfectly complied with the divine will.

e. Finally Nestorius held that it took place by 'equivocal denomination', the name of the one person 'the Son of God' being accommodated to the other 'the Son of man'. Owen argues that in the few places that divinity is directly ascribed to Christ in the Scriptures there is no homonymy or equivocation.\*\*

Although there was some value in these arguments, Owen believed that they all missed the point with respect to the constitution of Christ's person, for they failed to take into full account what was at the heart of the Biblical testimony concerning the incarnation.

This was in the first place that 'The Word was made flesh', John 1:14.

As we have seen Owen held that this could not be interpreted as the substantial transformation of the Word into flesh which is destructive of the Divine Being and all its essential properties. Therefore it must mean that without ceasing to be what he was, the Word took on all the properties of 'flesh', or more precisely that the Son assumed human nature into personal subsistence with himself. None of the above descriptions adequately express this.

The second passage Owen considered was Phil.2:6-8. 'Being in the form of God, he took upon him the form of a servant, and became obedient.' The person who shared the same nature as the Father 'took on him the form of a servant' - that is the nature of a man in the condition of a servant. It was in this nature that he was obedient. This is the critical part of Owen's argument - the person was obedient in human nature, that is as a human. The human nature was his own, he was a man, he did not merely dwell in a human.\*7

Thirdly we look briefly at the point Owen drew from Isaiah 9:6. 'Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and his name shall be called The mighty God.' The child and the mighty God are the same person. Here is the essential idea that the doctrine of the hypostatic union aimed to preserve - the eternal Son of God and the man Christ Jesus are one and the same person. But this is precisely what Nestorius' various conceptions of the nature of the union failed to establish.\*8

There were, however, a number of points in Nestorius' arguments of which Owen approved, which although ineffective in explaining the constitution of Christ's person, were of value in considering the relation between the two distinct natures.

### 13. The natures distinguished

The above account of the doctrine of incarnation has emphasised that the Word, in becoming 'flesh', suffered no change in his own divine nature, but rather took to himself the complete nature of man and made it his own. To this extent it fully accords with the Definition of

Chalcedon.

...our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood...<sup>60</sup>

Understanding or explaining this affirmation that the incarnate Son participates fully in both Godhead and manhood is generally conceded to be the primary problem of Christology. A simple and superficially attractive explanation of it is that the incarnation resulted in a new person whose one new nature was an amalgam or mixture of divinity and humanity. But the consequence of such a theory is either the loss or sublimation into the divine of essential aspects of Christ's human nature as the mind or will, or the effective denial of the Son's full divinity during the time of incarnation.

Eutyches' monophysite christology, we saw above, was the outstanding example of this. "(He) supposed such a composition and mixture of the two natures in the person of Christ, as that the human nature at least should lose all its essential properties, and have neither understanding nor will of its own."<sup>70</sup> On the other hand the denial of the Son's full divinity during the incarnation, so that the properties of the divine nature should not overwhelm his humanity, is the temptation to which kenotic theorists have so often succumbed.

Yet the dependence of an effective soteriology on the completeness both of Christ's humanity and his divinity and the belief in the radical distinction between the two, led the Church, not without much dissension, to finally affirm at Chalcedon that the same Christ is 'recognized in two natures without confusion'.<sup>71</sup> Owen outlines the implications of this.

Each nature doth preserve its own natural, essential properties, entirely unto and in itself; without mixture, without composition or confusion, without such a real communication of the one unto the other as that the one would become the subject of the properties of the other.<sup>72</sup>

Owen was in part responding here to the Lutheran interpretation of the 'communicatio idiomatum' as a real participation by the two natures of the attributes or properties of one another. In particular, their understanding of the eucharist demanded a transfer of the property of ubiquity from the divine to the human nature. He argued instead that each nature remains the subject of its own properties. "The divine nature is not made temporary, finite, limited, subject to passion or alteration by this union; nor is the human nature rendered immense, infinite, omnipotent."<sup>73</sup> What is true of the being of each nature is also true of its activity.

Each nature operates in him according unto its essential properties. The divine nature knows all things, upholds all things, rules all things, acts by its presence everywhere; the human nature was born, yielded obedience, died, and rose again. But it is the same person, the same Christ, that acts all these things, - the one nature being his no less than the other.<sup>74</sup>

We see that Owen took very seriously the ascription of full humanity to Christ, yet he was no less anxious that divinity should function according to its nature. His interpretation of Christ, therefore, is clearly opposed to any form of amalgam of the two natures, as for instance in the view that Christ's human nature is the instrument by which or through which the Logos as a divine centre of action relates to the world. Having a human nature means that Christ has a human mind and psychology. There is no suggestion of Apollinarianism, in which divinity in effect replaces some aspect of the human condition.

Yet with such a clear affirmation of the distinct operation of the two natures, the question that naturally arises is, 'How do two natures with such disparate principles of operation interact?'

#### 14. Interaction between the natures

We have been following Owen's exposition of the concept of incarnation in which he has given an explanation of the substantial union of the

divine and human natures in the person of Christ. It was described as a hypostatical union in that the two natures were conceived to be substantially united in the person or 'hypostasis' of the Son. The person of the Son though never ceasing to be what he was, became what he was not, in assuming human nature to be his own. It is not that the Son united himself to a man, but rather that he became man, as he took human form.

But this says nothing of the practical interaction of the divine and the human in his person. If his human nature is to maintain its integrity, it must, as Karl Rahner argues, possess a 'genuine, spontaneous, free, spiritual, active centre, a human selfconsciousness, which as creaturely faces (God) in a genuinely human attitude of adoration, obedience, a most radical sense of creaturehood.'<sup>5</sup> (Where Rahner had 'the eternal Word', I have substituted 'God') How does the divine nature relate to such a human nature in Christ? Or conversely, how does Christ as man experience God?

Owen's answer to both these questions was simple and illuminating - it was by the Holy Spirit. The importance to Christology of such a perception cannot be overestimated. If it is justified it means that the person of Jesus Christ cannot be adequately explained apart from a recourse to work of the Holy Spirit.

The significance of this for our present discussion is apparent. We have been considering whether the concept of the incarnation is an appropriate way of unfolding or expressing the person of Christ. Owen's exposition has shown how it coheres with his understanding of God's redemptive activity as a manifestation of the glory of the divine nature. In his attempt to demonstrate its internal coherence he has followed some of the main lines of the classical and in particular Alexandrian christology of the Early Church. The inner logic of his argument, however, has led to the position, where the incarnation, on its own, is seen to be finally inadequate as an expression of the being of Christ. For of itself a doctrine of the Son's assumption of human nature leaves unexplained the manner in which that nature experiences God. It needs to be supplemented by a theology of the work of the Spirit in the man Christ Jesus, a perspective which for ease of discourse we have described simply as 'inspiration'.



## NOTES to CHAPTER TWO

- 1 See G.R.Cragg, *From Puritanism to the Age of Reason*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 1950), p.13.
- 2 John Owen, *Christologia: or, A Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ*, Works 1, p.5.
- 3 Works 1, p.3.
- 4 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus - God and Man*, SCM Press Ltd. (London, 1985), p.34.
- 5 Works 1, pp.44ff.
- 6 Works 1, p.45.
- 7 Works 1, p.145.
- 8 Works 1, p.45.
- 9 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, E.T. by Henry Beveridge, Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1970), I 4 1 pp.64ff. I am not suggesting that Calvin and Owen were radically opposed in this matter, nevertheless it is significant that in the *Institutes* Calvin could discuss our knowledge of God and the part played in it by the Scriptures without referring in any detail to the person of Christ.
- 10 Works 1, p.69.
- 11 Works 1, p.69.
- 12 Works 1, p.46.
- 13 Works 1, p.44.
- 14 Works 1, p.65.
- 15 Works 1, pp.74ff.
- 16 Consider Frances Young's provocative conundrum: "If Jesus was an entirely normal human being, no evidence can be produced for the incarnation. If no evidence can be produced, there can be no basis on which to claim that an incarnation took place." Although her argument is not 'watertight', she nevertheless highlights the inherent difficulty any approach faces which would aim to argue without theological presuppositions from the premise that Jesus is human to the conclusion that he is divine. *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued*, Ed. by Michael Goulder, SCM Press Ltd. (London, 1979), p.62
- 17 Pannenberg, pp.66-73.
- 18 Works 1, p.180.
- 19 Works 1, p.179.
- 20 Works 1, pp.179ff.
- 21 Works 1, p.182.
- 22 Works 1, p.183.
- 23 Works 1, p.184.
- 24 Works 1, p.185.
- 25 Works 1, p.191.
- 26 Works 1, pp.192ff.
- 27 Works 1, p.105.
- 28 Works 1, p.206.
- 29 Works 1, p.207.
- 30 Alan Richardson, 'Problem of History' in *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Ed. by Alan Richardson, SCM Press Ltd. (London, 1969), p.156.
- 31 William Temple, *Christus Veritas*, Macmillan & Co Ltd. (London, 1954), p.106.
- 32 John Rodwell, 'Myth and Truth in Scientific Enquiry,' in *Incarnation and Myth*, p.68.
- 33 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Blackwell

- (Oxford, 1980), p.141.
- 34 Ibid., p.141.
- 35 Works 1, p.58.
- 36 Works 1, p.61.
- 37 Works 1, p.62.
- 38 Works 1, p.54.
- 39 Works 1, p.56.
- 40 Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol.2, p.77.
- 41 *Hebrews* 2, p.86.
- 42 Works 1, p.225.
- 43 It seems to me that the criticism that Alasdair Heron makes of Anselm's attempt to show why it was appropriate that the Son in particular should become incarnate is also applicable to Owen. Heron argues that "it is hard not to feel that the question is being put back to front, that he and those with whom he is debating have forgotten that it is only in the recognition of Jesus as Son of God that we have any basis of speaking of an eternal Son". Alasdair I.C.Heron, *The Holy Spirit*, Marshall Morgan & Scott (London, 1983), p.172.
- 44 Works 1, pp.218ff.
- 45 Works 1, p.13.
- 46 Richard Ottley, *The Doctrine of the Incarnation*, vol. 2, Meuthen and Co. (London, 1896), p.286.
- 47 Pannenberg, pp.310ff. For other twentieth century criticisms of the kenotic theory see William Temple, *Christus Veritas*, pp.142ff. and D.M.Baillie, *God was in Christ*, Faber and Faber Ltd. (London, 1961), pp.95-97.
- 48 Works 1, p.327.
- 49 Works 1, p.327.
- 50 Works 1, p.327.
- 51 Works 1, pp.46ff.
- 52 Works 1, p.15.
- 53 *Hebrews* 3, p.461.
- 54 *Hebrews* 3, p.461.
- 55 Works 1, p.233.
- 56 *Hebrews* 3, p.461.
- 57 Karl Barth's perception of the problem is very similar to that of Owen. He insists that the Son of God did not take to himself an already existing man. "For this would necessary mean either that the Son of God, surrendering his own existence as such, has changed himself into this man...or that He did not exist as One, but in a duality, as the Son of God maintaining His own existence, and somewhere and somehow alongside as this individual man." *Church Dogmatics*, IV 2, E.T. by G.W.Bromiley, T.& T.Clark (Edinburgh, 1985), p.48.
- 58 See John McIntyre's discussion on 'anhypostasia' in *The Shape of Christology*, SCM Press Ltd. (London, 1966), pp.88-98. Although he is aware that 'hypostasis' must be construed logically, he later seems to consider it as one of the attributes of human being. "If, therefore, the hypostasis forms part of what it means to be human, then surely man's redemption requires that the hypostasis in a man be redeemed as well as his physis."(p.98) It needs to be emphasised that an entity's 'hypostasis' is the whole concrete reality of it existing as distinct from all others in its class. In man it is certainly not a 'something' that can be considered in isolation from the whole person and which is in need of redemption.
- 59 *Hebrews* 3, p.461.

- 60 McIntyre, p.105.
- 61 On occasion Owen does speak of human nature in what appears a Platonic sense. "He took to himself the *nature* of all men, and not the *person* of any man." (Hebrews III p.445) But this does not mean that Christ's nature, once assumed, was anything more than one distinct entity. It did not contain within itself the nature of all men.
- 62 See John Baillie's careful survey of some of the different forms that modern theories of 'anhypostasia' have taken, *God was in Christ*, pp.85-93.
- 63 Works 1, p.227.
- 64 Works 1, pp.223ff.
- 65 Works 1, p.230.
- 66 Works 1, pp.231ff.
- 67 Works 1, pp.232ff.
- 68 Works 1, p.233.
- 69 *Documents of the Christian Church*, selected and edited by Henry Bettenson, Oxford University Press (London, 1967), p.51.
- 70 Works 1, pp.229ff.
- 71 In the first chapter we suggested that the affirmation of the full and active humanity of Jesus at Chalcedon was a concession to the Antiochene and therefore more 'inspirational' form of christology. This emphasis is in sharp contrast to that of Cyril of Alexandria, who did not concede any real growth in wisdom to Jesus. For examples of Cyril's teaching on this see A.B.Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ*, T.& T.Clark (Edinburgh, 1889), pp.366-372.
- 72 Works 1, p.234.
- 73 Works 1, p.234.
- 74 Works 1, p.234.
- 75 It seems to me that Rahner's clear apprehension of what is entailed in the humanity of Christ is marred by his suggestion that the object of his adoration and obedience was the eternal Word. There is no indication that the man Christ Jesus adored and obeyed the Word. As creature his relationship was always directed to God as Father. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. I, E.T. by Cornelius Ernst, Helicon Press (Baltimore, Darton), Longman & Todd (London, 1961), p.158.

## III

## INSPIRATION

*The Spirit renews God's image in Christ's human nature*

## 1. Quakers and Socinians

Amid the political upheavals and theological intensity of mid-seventeenth century England a variety of new religious ideas found the soil fertile for their own propagation.

One of these was the Quaker doctrine of the 'inner light'. George Fox, the apostle of the movement, believed that God spoke to mankind directly by the Spirit or 'Divine light', in contrast to the generally accepted belief that it was through the Scriptures that he made himself known. In his journal of 1646 he shares the revelation or 'opening' God had given him of how men came to faith:

...that every man was enlightened by the Divine Light of Christ, and I saw it shine through all, and that they that believed in it came out of condemnation and came to the Light of Life, and became children of it; but they that hated it, and did not believe in it, were condemned by it, though they made a profession of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

The Divine or 'inner' light was held to be a universal principle through which all men could have an immediate and individual access to God as he revealed himself directly and inwardly by his Spirit. The individual human spirit was considered as the place where God was to be heard for this was the dwelling place of God's Spirit. Such an inward illumination was considered to be self-authenticating, needing the support of neither Scripture nor reason for its authority.<sup>2</sup>

Robert Barclay writing thirty years later was one of the most able of the Quaker apologists. A key principle he used in the defence of a direct or unmediated revelation was that the Christian's experience of God was essentially the same as that of the prophets of old. "God's converse with man from Adam to Moses was by the unmediated manifestation

of his Spirit... Furthermore, none was excluded from this unmediated fellowship who earnestly sought after it and waited for it."<sup>3</sup> The implication of his argument was that it is not only possible for God to speak to us as he did to the prophets, but if we have the appropriate attitude and take the necessary action we will hear him so speak.

Geoffrey Nuttall makes the interesting observation that the Quakers denied a close conjunction between the Spirit and the Word precisely because of the seriousness with which they read the Old Testament prophets.

It was this seriousness, making them regard prophetic behaviour as a model for their own, which also made them so insistent that the same Spirit which was in the prophets, and in the writers of the Scripture, was in themselves.<sup>4</sup>

The Quaker understanding of divine revelation had far-reaching consequences for the practice of their faith. As the final or authoritative principle of their lives was neither reason nor the Scriptures, but the inner voice of the Spirit it was essential, they believed, to develop a habit of 'listening' for him and obeying only what they heard him say. It was perhaps to be expected that in the beginning this doctrine should lead to a number of religious excesses and these began to be related in the common mind with any theology that emphasised the work of the Spirit. Dependent on God's immediate and spontaneous guidance the Quakers grew to despise all fixed or formal religious structures including the ministry, sacraments and even church buildings. Their refusal to take oaths or pay tithes eventually gave rise to their persecution as a perceived threat to the stability of society. As a result of the reports associated with them, many observers linked any profession of dependence on the Spirit with a blind religious fanaticism.

On the other wing in the world of religious ideas at that time was the intellectually sophisticated approach of continental Socinianism. Socinians were in the vanguard of the movement which would have all knowledge submit to the bar of reason. This approach was proving to be singularly successful in the field of science and it was natural that many, who were not directly connected with Socinianism, should also

think it was appropriate in matters of religion. At the end of the century the title of John Locke's book *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures* reflected not only the temper of the age but was to become the major thesis "of Christian theology in England for the greater part of a century."<sup>5</sup>

In this context any recourse to the work of the Spirit was regarded with great suspicion, for it seemed to offer an excuse for irrationality in Christian faith. The principles of reason and the work of the Holy Spirit were often considered to be mutually exclusive. For it appeared that the duties and objectives of the Christian life were either reasonable in themselves and therefore worthy of being followed and by implication possible to be fulfilled by the enlightened man, or the Christian life was one of implicit obedience to the immediate promptings of God through his Spirit and questions of reasonableness were irrelevant.

These were not the only two possible alternatives, but they do represent the Charybdis and Scylla between which John Owen had to steer in his exposition of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. The prevalent attitude inclined towards the idea that reason should judge in matters of religion, and there was at that time a widespread reaction to the spiritual 'enthusiasts', which led to the derision by many of any activity ascribed to the Spirit.<sup>6</sup> Owen described the common mood:-

The very name of the Spirit is grown to be a reproach; nor do some think they can more despitefully expose any to scorn than by ascribing to them a "concern in the Spirit of God."<sup>7</sup>

This was not only an attitude among those outside the church, for many who professed a faith in the gospel were also reluctant to admit of or desire any personal participation in the work of the Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

How was the activity of the Spirit to be described and defended in this religious context? On the one hand there were the enthusiasm and spiritual excesses of the Quakers who with the same Spirit as the prophets of old were each guided directly and for whom the ultimate criterion of judgement was always the inner and direct experience of that Spirit. On the other hand there was the religious movement spawned

by the Socinians which held the Christian faith to be reasonable, by which they meant that a rational explanation could be given for all its beliefs and duties. Consequently it tended to be conceived of as a moral life pursued in accordance with a rationally justifiable belief system. In such a view there was not much need, or in fact room, for the present, dynamic activity of the Holy Spirit.

The nature of the task lying before Owen was, firstly, to show that the Spirit, far from being unnecessary to it, was in fact the very essence of the Christian faith and, secondly, to defend the conjunction of the Spirit to the Word and also uphold the right use of reason in Christian understanding. In 1674 he published his monumental study entitled *Pneumatologia, or A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, which was the major work on the subject in an age which treated the doctrine more thoroughly than any before. I believe Nuttall is essentially correct in his assertion that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit "with its manifold implications, received a more thorough and detailed consideration from the Puritans of seventeenth-century England than it has received at any other time in Christian history."<sup>9</sup>

Let us consider, then, Owen's argument that the Holy Spirit is the great promise of the Gospel apart from which we can neither know nor respond to God.

## 2. The Spirit in the Christian life

Owen held that once the Son had come and completed his work as a servant among us the ~~principle~~ remaining promise of the New Testament, the spring of all the rest, concerned the sending of the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup> To convince those who were dismissive of the central role of the Spirit in the life of the Christian, he brought forward the following arguments.

Firstly, Jesus promised the disciples that it was to their advantage that he should go and be replaced by the presence of the Spirit. "...for although it was a great privilege to have known Christ in this world after the flesh, yet it was much greater to enjoy him in the dispensation of the Spirit."<sup>11</sup> It is through the Spirit that every

believer knows and experiences the risen Christ. Conversely, it is by the Spirit alone that the presence of Christ is mediated to the church. The Spirit is thus the objective and dynamic reality through which the risen Christ continues to be made present to the Church today.

Secondly Owen drew attention to the fact that the whole dispensation of the gospel is called 'the ministry of the Spirit', in contrast with the Mosaic covenant or 'ministry of the law'. (II Corinthians 3) This, he argued, indicates that it is a ministry which the Spirit makes effective or one in which the Spirit in his gifts and graces is communicated to men.<sup>12</sup> To separate the Spirit from the gospel would be to destroy it and leave it a dead letter, which is what happens when the proclamation is treated as simply a system of truth.<sup>13</sup> The gospel, therefore, cannot be considered as merely a message or system, or even a history, rather it is an ongoing event in which the Spirit is the principal agent. It is certainly not possible to interpret it as a moral life lived in conformity to a particular set of beliefs.

Thirdly he argued that, "There is not any spiritual or saving good from first to last communicated unto us, or that we are from and by the grace of God made partakers of, but it is revealed to us and bestowed on us by the Holy Ghost."<sup>14</sup> God gives to us and acts among us only by his Spirit, how then shall we receive his mercy or grace apart from it? It is useful to examine here how Owen's understanding of the Spirit's role as the revealer of divine truth differed from that of the Quakers.

He considered God's revelation to us of his nature and will in three stages. First, the person of Christ is the real, formal object of our faith. As the Son of God incarnate he is the representative image of God to us. Second, there is the medium of revelation whereby this objective reality is conveyed to our minds. This is the Gospel apart from which we know nothing of the image of God. Third, there is "the internal light of the mind in the saving illumination of the Holy Spirit, enabling us - by that means, and in the use of it - spiritually to discern and behold the glory of God in the face of Christ."<sup>15</sup> It would appear that Owen understands the Spirit to give us a knowledge of God in the face of Christ which, although mediated by the Scripture, nevertheless has an intuitive aspect and is not wholly discursive.



...we who were "darkness" become "light in the Lord," or come to know God in Christ savingly, looking into and discerning spiritual things with a proper intuitive sight...<sup>16</sup>

The careful ordering of these three aspects in Owen's thought safeguards the centrality of the person of Christ as historically experienced among men in all our knowledge of God; the gospel preached and written as the objective criterion by which that knowledge may be evaluated; and the essential role of the Spirit in enlightening our minds that we may spiritually know God and be enabled to respond to him in faith. The Quakers, we have seen, would not allow the Scriptures as an objective reality to either mediate or be a principle by which to evaluate the truth of their inner revelations. It was not long before they also considered that the knowledge of Christ's historical life was not essential for faith.

We willingly admit that this knowledge (of the life and death of Christ) is very beneficial and inspiring, but not absolutely necessary for those from whom God himself has withheld it. For, if they allow his seed and light to enlighten their hearts, they may become partakers of the mystery of his death, even though they have not heard of it.<sup>17</sup>

Aware of the inability of the mere letter of the Scripture to impart spiritual life, and distinguishing between an academic knowledge of God and real faith, the Quakers untied revelation from the objective Gospel record in the interests of a personal or existential response to God himself. As a consequence the knowledge of the historical life of the incarnate Christ became a matter of secondary importance. It is of interest that in more recent times an existential theology has again emphasised the gap between an intellectual knowledge and the reality of spiritual experience. Thus Emil Brunner writes in *The Mediator*:

That which can be known, that which is continuous with our own knowledge, and can be connected with it, is not revelation nor is it faith; it is knowledge and intellectual truth...for any truth which can be humanly proved to be true by a process of examination and inquiry is, eo ipso, not revelation but an intellectual idea. Faith does not come into the reckoning at all.<sup>18</sup>

However, where the lines of connection between our intellectual knowledge and our religious experience are broken in this way theologians, like Kierkegaard and Bultmann, are bound, as the early Quakers did, to come to regard the content of the historical life of Jesus as non-essential for faith.<sup>19</sup>

Owen's final thesis was that there is no good that we ourselves do that is holy and acceptable to God "but it is an effect of the Holy Spirit; it is of his operation in us and by us".<sup>20</sup> For the Scriptures make clear that we can do nothing apart from Christ, yet it is only by the Spirit that we receive and are empowered by his grace. This does not mean that Owen gave no place to the use of reason in religious thinking or confined theological debate to the 'regenerate'.

Nor do we here plead that reason is blind and corrupted, and that the natural man cannot discern the things of God, and so require that men do prove themselves regenerate before we admit them to judge of the truth of the propositions under debate...<sup>21</sup>

Understanding the grammatical and literal sense of the propositions as they appear in the Scripture is open to all, but it is only by the Spirit that we are able to fully acquiesce in what God has revealed, receiving it as the truth and through it being captivated to the 'obedience of faith'. It was in this that he differed from the Socinians, not that he decried the use of reason, but rather that he denied the sufficiency of it, apart from the action of the Spirit, to bring us to a true faith and saving knowledge of God.

Owen thus presented a comprehensive argument for the essential role of the Spirit's work in all aspects of the believer's faith and life, demonstrating from the Scriptures that it is by the Holy Spirit "we are regenerated; by him we are sanctified; by him we are cleansed; by him are we assisted in and unto every good work."<sup>22</sup> However, in the course of the discussion he also developed a conception of divine revelation which was able to meet, on the one hand, the Quaker concern about the spiritual nature of God's word to the believer, and on the other the Socinian awareness that reason must play a part in our religious understanding.

In so attributing to the Spirit's activity all the believer's experience of and response to God, Owen was not suggesting that such a work of the Spirit was thereby some universal phenomenon, common to and underlying the experience of man as a religious being. He was careful, rather, to maintain a clear distinction between a general work of the Spirit in nature or creation and his particular work of grace in the formation of the church.

### 3. The Spirit in Nature and in Grace

John Taylor in his recent study on the Holy Spirit wrote, "Every time I am given this unexpected awareness towards some other creature and feel this current of communication between us, I am touched and activated by something that comes from the fiery heart of the divine love, the eternal gaze of the Father towards the Son, of the Son towards the Father".<sup>23</sup> This 'awareness of the other' is held by him to be brought about by the direct activity of the Spirit. Taylor goes on to relate the Spirit to other experiences common to the human condition such as responsible choice, self-oblation and sacrifice.<sup>24</sup> It seems to me that he understands the Spirit to be the active principle underlying this general spirituality, much as the Logos was understood by the Greeks to be the foundation of all rationality. The work of the Spirit in Christ and the Church is thereby believed to be continuous with his wider work in humanity as a whole.

And it is essential for our doctrine of the Holy Spirit to recognize that so much can be said about him which is universal.<sup>25</sup>

Owen's approach was rather different. He strongly affirmed the Spirit's work in the natural order and in assigning to the Spirit the perfecting or finishing role in the divine creative activity he was dependent on a conception first used by Basil of Caesarea.

And in the creation bethink thee first, I pray thee, of the original cause of all things that are made, the Father; of the

creative cause, the Son; of the perfecting cause, the Spirit...<sup>26</sup>

Owen developed this idea and argued that the Holy Spirit's work was a cherishing and preserving of the created world, carrying it towards that form, beauty and perfection for which it was designed. "Hence, upon the command of God, it brought forth all sorts of creatures in abundance, according to the seeds and principles of life which were communicated unto the rude, inform chaos, by the cherishing motion of the Holy Spirit."<sup>27</sup>

As for man, it was by the Holy Spirit that "his soul was made meet and able to live for God, as his sovereign lord, chiefest good, and last end."<sup>28</sup> We saw in the last chapter that Owen considered this moral uprightness of man's nature as the essential characteristic of the image of God which he bore. Yet this divine image has now been marred and is in need of restoration by a new work of the same Spirit.

This new work or new creation, as Owen calls it, entails the founding, building and completing of the church of God. It is God's work of grace, based in the person and on the mediation of Christ and made effectual by his Spirit. It means that in the midst of the Spirit's continuing work in the 'old' creation, preserving and upholding all things according to their own nature, particularly the care and guidance of men in all their relations with one another, there is nevertheless a new and different work of the Spirit in progress, the formation of the church.

It is this formation of the Church which Owen describes as the Spirit's gracious work, a work which is always related to the person and mission of Christ.

#### 4. Christ as the foundation and goal of the Spirit's work

This new creation or formation of the church of God is centred on Jesus Christ. He is its foundation, its model, its goal. The gracious work of the Spirit is therefore directly related to him, whether in the preparation for the new creation or the actual establishment of it. As

to the preparatory work of the Spirit Owen argued that:

Whatever the Holy Spirit wrought in an eminent manner under the Old Testament, it had generally and for the most part, if not absolutely and always, a respect unto our Lord Jesus Christ and the gospel; and so was preparatory unto the completing of the great work of the new creation in and by him.<sup>29</sup>

The giving of prophecy, the writing of Scripture and the miracles, were all understood by Owen, as a work of preparation by the Spirit for the coming into being of the church. "From him (the Spirit), therefore, was the word of promise and the gift of prophecy, whereon the church was founded and whereby it was built; from him was the revelation and institution of all the ordinances of religious worship; from him was that communication of gifts and gracious abilities which any persons received for the edification, rule, protection, and deliverance of the church."<sup>30</sup> But by making ready for the church in this manner, the Spirit was in fact preparing the way for Christ.

Secondly, Owen recognised that it is also in the actual establishment of the church, the bringing about of the new creation, that the Spirit's work is directly related to Jesus. In the first place the Spirit's activity presupposes and brings to completion Christ's work of mediation between God and man, making it effectual in the church.<sup>31</sup> In the second place, and of particular interest to our study, the Spirit, in recreating the image of God in the church, must work directly in the life of Jesus Christ himself, for as its head he is himself an integral part of that church. We shall consider this idea and its implications in greater detail in the rest of this chapter.

Before we do, however, let us briefly consider what Owen's argument here means for the relation between our knowledge of Christ and our knowledge of the Spirit. A study of the growth of Christian traditions would suggest that the Spirit was the known and common factor in the religious world into which Jesus of Nazareth entered and in terms of which his person and mission were to be interpreted. As Alasdair Heron rightly points out with respect to the Gospels:

...very little is said to fill out the picture of the Spirit: *it*

is, so to speak, a known quantity, whereas *Jesus'* identity and destiny needs to be interpreted and proclaimed.<sup>32</sup>

Yet we have seen from Owen's above outline that theological reflection also encourages a perspective in which the order is reversed. In it the Spirit is interpreted and understood in relation to Christ: Christ is the centre and goal of all the Spirit's activity; his atoning work and resurrection is the ground or basis of the Spirit's outpouring; it is his life that the Spirit imparts and his likeness that he creates in us; in short, he is the one that the Spirit has been given to glorify. Such an understanding meant that the New Testament authors were compelled to interpret the action of the Spirit in the Old Testament in the light of Christ and even designate him as the Spirit of Christ. (I Pet.1.10-12) Our thesis is concerned with the way we are to understand Jesus Christ, and this chapter in particular is examining how he is to be interpreted in relation to the Spirit. Nevertheless in doing so we are aware that there exists a subtle interrelationship between our knowledge of Christ and of the Spirit and that neither of them can in fact be considered simply as the given in terms of which the other is to be known.

We return now to examine Owen's thesis that the Spirit worked directly in the life of Christ as he was the head of the Church.

##### 5. Firstborn among many brothers

In the previous chapter we considered Owen's exposition of the doctrine of the incarnation, or what it meant for the eternal Word to become a man. In it the reality of Christ's manhood was vigorously affirmed. Owen maintained, however, that the Son not only took our nature, but also entered into our condition. "His conformity unto the brethren... consisted in two things: first his participation of their nature; secondly, His copartnership with them in their condition of suffering and temptation."<sup>33</sup>

This was a perspective of which orthodox theology had often lost sight. It had generally been assumed that the affirmation that Christ was

ontologically one with us - that he had a human nature including body, mind and soul - was a sufficient description of what was implied by being human. Owen was aware that to be a man also meant to be part of the human condition. Christ did not simply have our being, but he was part of our world and its history, its complex human relationships and social structures, its joy and its suffering.

His calling us brethren, and owning of us, made him instantly obnoxious unto all the miseries the guilt whereof we had contracted upon ourselves. The owning of the alliance unto us cost him, as it were all he was worth; for being rich, "for our sakes he became poor." He came into the prison and into the furnace to own us.<sup>34</sup>

The Son of God did not only become a man, but by owning us as his brothers and sisters he entered fully into all the suffering and temptation to which we are exposed. He became one with us not simply through sharing our nature and lineage, but by participating in the conditions which bring such pain and impoverishment to our lives. The Son thus became an integral part of humanity, a humanity which needed to be created anew and reformed so that it might be the church of God.

One of the reasons that many theologians have been reluctant to follow through the implications of the incarnation in this way is their commitment to a doctrine of the sinlessness of Christ. They would argue that Christ was among us to forgive rather than to be forgiven, to renew others rather than himself to be in need of renewal. Owen was not, however, insensitive to these issues, and so was always careful to affirm that although Christ shared the consequences that arose out of our guilt, yet he himself was guiltless, that although tempted as we are, he was without sin.<sup>35</sup> He believed that the doctrine of the sinlessness of Christ was consistent with his argument that the Son had identified with fallen humanity and that the image of God, lost in Adam, had to be first restored in Christ the man,<sup>36</sup> our elder brother, the head of the church, before being restored among us, his mystical body.

God, in the human nature of Christ, did perfectly renew that blessed image of his in our nature which we lost in Adam, with an addition of many glorious endowments which Adam was not made

partaker of....God designed and gave unto Christ grace and glory; and he did it that he might be the prototype of what he designed unto us, and would bestow upon us.<sup>37</sup>

This is similar to the position that Edward Irving was to maintain so vigorously and at such cost to himself some hundred and fifty years later. Defending himself from the charge of heresy he argued, "The point at issue is simply this: Whether Christ's flesh had the grace of sinlessness and incorruption from its proper nature, or from the indwelling of the Holy Ghost. I say the latter. I assert, that in its proper nature it was as the flesh of His mother, but, by virtue of the Holy Ghost's quickening and inhabiting of it, it was preserved sinless and incorruptible."<sup>38</sup> His concern, like Owen's before him, was that Christ's life should be seen as the dynamic overcoming of sinful temptation and real growth in grace, and thus be the prototype of the believer's life. While Irving spoke of the incarnate life of Christ as one which demonstrated that a created substance, in which sin and Satan had power, might yet be wrested out of their hands, and presented blameless and faultless in the presence of God,<sup>39</sup> Owen stressed the complementary concept, that is, that in the life of Christ the image of God was restored to human nature.

But how is the divine image to be restored to the human nature of Christ? We have seen above that Owen held it to be the particular work of the Spirit to establish the new creation, to restore the image of God in the church. Now what the Spirit was to do in the Church, that is Christ's mystical body, must first be accomplished in Christ's physical body or human nature. "The same hand which laid this foundation doth also finish the building."<sup>40</sup> There is thus a direct correspondence between the work of the Spirit in the man Christ Jesus and his work in all believers.

And this belongs unto the establishment of our faith, that he who prepared, sanctified, and glorified the human nature, the natural body of Jesus Christ, the head of the church, hath undertaken to prepare, sanctify, and glorify his mystical body, or all the elect given unto him of the Father.<sup>41</sup>

How firm is the biblical base for Owen's argument that the Spirit renews



the divine image in the human nature of Christ? In considering his answer to this question we need to remember that he used the expression 'renewal of the divine image' to include all that the Spirit does in sanctifying, equipping, comforting and protecting the individual as he transforms him into the likeness of God.

## 6. The Spirit's work in Jesus

Owen summarised the Scriptural testimony to the Spirit's activity in different aspects of Christ's life, from his conception in the Virgin's womb to his glorification at the right hand of the Father.

a. The miraculous conception and formation of the body of Christ in the womb of the Virgin was, he held, the work of the Holy Spirit. Owen conceded that in the Scriptures this is also ascribed to the Father (Heb.x.5), but only for his eternal designation of it; and to the Son (Heb.ii.14) for voluntarily assuming it. "But the immediate divine efficiency in this matter was the peculiar work of the Holy Ghost".<sup>42</sup> His argument was based on the 'birth narratives' recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,  
"Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your  
wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy  
Spirit".(Mt.i.20)

This was not, however, the interpretation that most of the Fathers gave to these passages, and even as late as Thomas Aquinas the expression, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" was understood as referring to the Word rather than to the Spirit.<sup>43</sup> Owen, nevertheless, made a clear distinction between the Spirit's action in forming the body and the Word's act in assuming it to himself. The actual conception, or formation of the physical body of Christ must, he insisted, be referred to the direct, formative action of the Holy Spirit.

He recognised that this creative work of the Spirit, as described in the

Gospels, was not 'ex nihilo', rather the body of Christ "was formed or made of the substance of the blessed Virgin".<sup>44</sup> This ensured the physical descent necessary, not only for the fulfillment of the Abrahamic and Davidic promises, but in order that Christ might be related to us as a 'kinsman'. We saw earlier that Owen did not consider the human nature of Christ in a Platonic sense as some ideal form of universal or inclusive reality, but he held, rather, that it was substantiated in the Son as a distinct and individual entity. The relation that Christ as man has to us, is not, then, that of a universal to its particulars, but rather that of an individual man sharing with other men and women in a common ancestry. It was on the basis of this natural or family relationship that he was able to be our mediator.

The miraculous conception of Christ by the creative or formative act of the Holy Spirit on the substance of the Virgin was, therefore, understood by Owen as a biblical witness not to his divine nature, but to the reality of his humanity. The 'virgin birth' does not provide us with a way of conceiving how one person can be both man and God, for the conception of Christ, considered in itself, does not indicate that he is partly divine. Rather the Spirit's work in 'overshadowing' Mary is linked by Owen to the Spirit 'hovering' over the original unformed creation, in neither case is the resulting work invested with divinity. The divine nature of Christ is to be understood, rather, in terms of incarnation, for although the Holy Spirit formed the body and soul, the eternal Son, as an act of love and wisdom, assumed that human nature in the instant of its formation into personal union with himself.

As to the purity of the body thus formed, Owen argued that he was without any constitutional tendency or capacity for evil. Although he took on the normal weaknesses of the human frame there was none of those frailties which result from the misuse of the body or from a corrupted temperament.<sup>45</sup> Owen here is not arguing that Christ's humanity was quite different from other men, but merely that he was not afflicted with the sort of weakness of character, which is contingent to, rather than being a necessary part of human nature.

Hence it is that one is disposed to passion, wrath, and anger; another to vanity and lightness; a third to sensuality and fleshly pleasures; and so others to sloth and idleness.<sup>46</sup>

The freedom from this type of character deficiency did not, he believed, detract from the fact that Christ had to face all the rigors of suffering and temptation that it was possible for a man to endure. On the contrary he believed that the purity of Christ's nature made him more sensible than others to these things.

b. At the moment of its conception the Spirit sanctified the human nature of Christ and filled his soul with grace appropriate to its receptivity. This sanctifying work of the Spirit was necessary "for let the natural faculties of the soul, the mind, will, and affections, be created pure, innocent, undefiled...yet there is not enough to enable any rational creature to live to God".<sup>47</sup> Underlying this argument is Owen's belief that man as a creature has no natural ability in himself by which he is able to respond to and live in relationship with God. The power to love and obey God must have a divine source. Christ as man, sinless though he be, is thus in need of the sanctifying work of the Spirit that he might live to God.<sup>48</sup>

Owen is also aware that if we take the humanity of Christ seriously we are required to conceive of him as one who received grace appropriate to his receptivity. For instance, the grace that Jesus could receive as a babe in arms was far different from the gracious comfort and support given to him by the Spirit when as an adult he offered himself in obedience to God.

c. The Spirit continued the work of sanctification in Christ's life. Our attention is drawn to two matters of importance. Firstly, Christ as man experienced God's grace "by the rational faculties and powers of his soul, his understanding, will, and affections; for he acted grace as a man".<sup>49</sup> Not the divine nature, but his rational soul was the motivating principle of his moral actions. "Now, in the improvement and exercise of these faculties and powers of his soul, he had and made a progress after the manner of other men; for he was made like unto us 'in all things,' yet without sin."<sup>50</sup> And this development required a progression in grace through the Holy Spirit.

And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him....And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.(Luke ii.40,52)

Secondly, the human nature of Christ was capable of growing in knowledge. For lack of knowledge is an aspect of human nature and is not a blamable defect. And so through his experience he grew in wisdom and knowledge and "in new trials and temptations he experimentally learned the new exercise of grace."<sup>51</sup> This was constantly done by the Holy Spirit working in his human nature.

It is here that Owen's independence from the tradition is most apparent. He has taken firmly hold of the nettle which so many orthodox theologians were unwilling to grasp, that is, the scriptural witness to Jesus' lack of knowledge and growth in grace. The principle which enabled him to do so was his argument that it is not Christ's divine nature but his rational soul which motivates his moral actions. We will consider the implications of this conception more fully in a later chapter,

d. The Holy Spirit anointed him with all those extraordinary powers and gifts which were necessary for the performance of his office. The outstanding witness to this is the prophecy from Isaiah which Luke records as having been read publicly by Christ in Nazareth and applied by him to his own ministry.

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has annointed me to preach good news to the poor.(Isaiah lxi.1)

This, Owen held, refers in particular to his prophetic office for which he was "fitted by this unction of the Spirit."<sup>52</sup> The fulness of gifts for this work he received only at his baptism, before which God's presence with him was only occasionally made manifest.<sup>53</sup> But from this time he was said to be 'full of the Holy Spirit'.(Luke iv.1)

e. By the power of the Spirit Jesus wrought the miracles which attested to and confirmed his ministry. Owen refers to Peter's description of

Jesus' ministry on the day of Pentecost. "Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him..."(Acts ii.22) The signs and wonders were thus immediate effects of divine power, but this power is always made manifest in the world through the working of the Holy Spirit.<sup>54</sup>

That the miracles in Jesus' ministry should be ascribed to the Holy Spirit receives additional support from the Gospel accounts of his exorcisms. Luke's Gospel indicates that Jesus casts out devils by the 'finger of God', that is, by the infinite power of God. The parallel account in Matthew refers the exorcisms directly to the Spirit of God.

But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.(Mt.xii.28)

f. The Spirit guided, directed, comforted and supported Jesus in the whole course of his ministry, temptations, obedience and sufferings.<sup>55</sup> He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness; by his assistance he was carried triumphantly through the temptations and he was empowered by him in his preaching. Through his whole ministry he was supported and consoled by God through his Spirit.<sup>56</sup>

g. Christ gave himself as an offering to God through the Holy Spirit.

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God...(Heb.ix.14)

Externally Christ's death appears merely as an act of penal suffering, but its principal efficacy lies in his obedience in offering himself to God. He dedicated himself to God, went voluntarily to the garden, and in "all that followed hereon, unto his giving up the ghost, he offered himself to God in and by those actings of the grace of the Holy Spirit in him."<sup>57</sup>

The principal graces of the Spirit in this offering of himself were his love to mankind and compassion to sinners; his zeal and desire for the glory of God; his submission and obedience to the will of God and his

faith and trust in God and his promises, both for himself and for the covenant which he was sealing with his blood."<sup>58</sup>

Apart from this free offering of himself the death of Christ would have been ineffective. For God was not atoned by "the outward suffering of a violent and bloody death" but rather he was so "delighted and pleased with these high and glorious acts of grace and obedience in Jesus Christ...that he would be angry with (mankind) no more".<sup>59</sup> This offering of himself as a sweet-smelling savour to God (Eph.v.2) was accomplished in his human nature by the Holy Spirit.

h. At his death the Holy Spirit protected his soul and preserved from corruption the body of Jesus.

i. The resurrection was the particular work of the Holy Spirit. For "although the Father is said to raise him from the dead by taking off the sentence of the law, which he had answered, (and) he himself also took his life again by an act of the love, care, and power of his divine nature, his living again being an act of his person, although the human nature only died."<sup>60</sup> Yet the immediate power which brought him again to life was the Holy Spirit.

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit...(Rom.viii.11)

j. The Holy Spirit glorified the human nature of Christ and prepared it for its place in the presence of God.

Owen has here drawn a profile of the life of Jesus Christ as a man who was prepared, sanctified, empowered and glorified by the Spirit of God. In it he describes a mental, physical and spiritual development of Christ's human nature through the action of the Spirit which is in no way qualitatively different from our own possible experience.

What encouraged him to follow this path, along which so few orthodox theologians had been willing to tread? It seems to me that among other influences it was his awareness that Christ was truly one of us, sharing not only our being but also our condition, that enabled him to give due weight to the Scriptural witness to the Spirit's work in Jesus' life. For if Christ is our prototype, manifesting a pattern of life to which we are to be conformed, then he must stand before God as we do. His experience, not only of suffering and of temptation, but also of grace and of God, must be continuous with our own. As a man before God, all that he received from him in comfort and empowering, or gave to him in adoration and obedience, must have been through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.

Now this way of understanding the person of Christ was not entirely new. A number of different groups, sometimes classified as Adoptionists and nearly always considered heretical by the orthodox church, had held views of Christ which were in some ways similar to Owen's above outline. For ease of reference we have characterised these christologies as inspirational. For they have in common the conception that Jesus as a man was inspired by the Holy Spirit with respect to his service for God and his relationship to him.

## 7. Inspiration and Incarnation

What is so interesting about Owen's exposition of the person of Christ in terms of the Spirit's inspiration, is that it took place within the context of an incarnational christology. It appears to me that this was the first time since the brilliant defence of the Christian faith by Irenaeus in the second century, that a theologian with an 'orthodox' understanding of the incarnation had recognised so clearly what it meant for Christ as a man to be inspired by the Holy Spirit.

We have suggested before that one of the reasons why the Church failed to hold together these two ways of thinking about the person of Christ was that they appear to be mutually exclusive. As a result it is possible to characterise most christologies, both within and without the orthodox tradition, as having either an inspirational or an

incarnational conception of Christ. It would seem that the attempt was almost never made to affirm both or to integrate them into one coherent christology. We have referred to Irenaeus' exceptional synthesis of the two concepts and his understanding of the relation between the two natures.

For as he became man in order to undergo temptation, so also was He the Word that He might be glorified; the Word remaining quiescent, that he might be capable of being tempted, dishonoured, crucified, and of suffering death, but the human nature being swallowed up in it (the divine), when it conquered, and endured [without yielding], and performed acts of kindness, and rose again, and was received up [into heaven].<sup>61</sup>

Irenaeus, in effect, divides up the activity of the incarnate Christ. In some actions the Word remains quiescent so that the human nature might act, but in the triumphant aspects of Christ's ministry he suggests that the humanity is incorporated into the divine, so that the actions are those of divinity.<sup>62</sup> His brilliance lay in the fact that he had recognised the problem. We must somehow allow for the reality of both divine and human action in Christ, for he is both the Word incarnate and the Messiah inspired by the Spirit. That Irenaeus' solution is somewhat forced and ultimately inadequate should not blind us to the depths of his theological insight. He wrote long before the great christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries and it is to be expected that he did not address some of the complex issues which were yet to come to light.

Owen, writing more than a thousand years after Chalcedon, was well acquainted with the Patristic christological debate. The major concern of this thesis is to examine how it was that he could, in the light of the apparent difficulties, so confidently explicate the person of Christ in terms of both inspiration and incarnation and whether he was justified in the way he did so.

We begin by considering the christological implications of Owen's profile of Christ as a man whose birth, life, death, resurrection and glorification are understood with respect to the direct action of the



Holy Spirit. What can we learn of the relation or interaction between his divine and human nature if as man he always experienced God through the Spirit? Owen was aware of the theological importance of the question and gave a summary of this relation in the following theses.

a. (That) the only singular immediate act of the person of the Son on the human nature was the assumption of it into subsistence with himself...

b. That the only necessary consequent of this assumption of the human nature, or the incarnation of the Son of God, is the personal union of Christ, or the inseparable subsistence of the assumed nature in the person of the Son...

c. That all other actings of God in the person of the Son towards the human nature were voluntary, and did not necessarily ensue on the union mentioned; for there was no transfusion of the properties of one nature into the other, nor real physical communication of divine essential excellencies unto the humanity...

d. The Holy Ghost...is the immediate, peculiar, efficient cause of all external divine operations...

e. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Son, no less than the Spirit of the Father...And hence is he the immediate operator of all divine acts of the Son himself, even on his own human nature...

f. ...the immediate actings of the Holy Ghost are not spoken of him absolutely, nor ascribed unto him exclusively, as unto the other persons and their concurrence in them.\*<sup>3</sup>

To summarise, although Owen affirmed the traditional doctrine that the Son assumed human nature into a personal union with himself, he denied that this requires of necessity anything more than the indissoluble existence of such a union. The divine nature does not act directly on the human nature and there is no real communication of properties between them. Rather all ongoing direct, divine activity on or in the

human nature of Jesus is the work of the Holy Spirit.

We concluded the last chapter by describing Owen's exposition of incarnation, that is the assumption by the Son of human nature into a personal union with himself, as being ultimately incomplete as a description of Christ's person. This was because in itself it failed to explain how the human nature, so assumed, interacted with the divine nature, or equivalently how Christ as man responded to God. The answer suggested then, and filled out in the above exposition, is that the relation between these natures must be explained in terms of the Holy Spirit. We must have recourse to a doctrine of the Spirit to give an adequate explanation of Christ's person.

Owen's theology, although affirming what we have described as incarnational and inspirational christologies, did not indicate that these were separate and sufficient accounts of the person of Christ. Rather each was clearly incomplete or inadequate on its own. The incarnation does not of itself explain how Christ as man experienced God, while a doctrine of inspiration fails to describe the relation of Christ to God in such a way that he might, as the agent of our reconciliation, adequately express the glory of the divine nature. The two require one another if a complete account is to be given of his person, and it is on this basis that his theology was able to consistently maintain both.

Owen might well have considered our interest in the integration of the concepts of inspiration and incarnation with some surprise, for he did not, himself, directly address the question of the compatibility or complementarity of these two ways of explicating Christ's person. However, from the exposition above it is clear that he did in practice distinctly affirm each of these christological types and we have argued that he was able to consistently do so for they were in his theology complementary rather than complete descriptions of the person of Christ. However, to speak simply of complementarity does not solve all our conceptual difficulties. Inspiration and incarnation suggest to our minds quite different ways of thinking about Christ and if we are to intelligently maintain both we need to be able to bring them into some sort of conceptual unity. To help clarify what we mean by that let us briefly consider how these concepts function in christology.

## 8. Master-stories

Owen's account of the Spirit's work in the new creation is in certain respects parallel to his outline of the Son's mission to the world. This story, as the other, has its starting point in the counsels of God and the sending act of the Father.

(W)hen God designed the great and glorious work of recovering fallen man and the saving of sinners, to the praise of the glory of his grace, he appointed in his infinite wisdom two means thereof. The one was the giving of his Son for them, and the other was the giving of his Spirit unto them.<sup>64</sup>

Whereas the Son was given by God that "all breaches and differences between him and us be removed, perfect peace and agreement made, and we rendered acceptable and well-pleasing in his sight",<sup>65</sup> so the Spirit was sent that "we may be kept and preserved meet for communion with him as our God, and for the enjoyment of him as our reward."<sup>66</sup>

This parallelism is also apparent in his accounts of the Son and the Spirit's action with respect to the humanity of Christ. It was the Son who assumed human nature into subsistence with himself, yet it was the Spirit who formed, sanctified and energised that assumed nature. Now these respective narratives are in essence what we mean by the concepts of incarnation and inspiration. They are not just any two of a large number of stories that could be told of the person of Christ, rather they provide a determinative framework for all other accounts of Christ's person, we could say they function as 'master-stories'.

This analysis would help us understand why the early church took just one biblical notion - the Word became flesh - from among the many possibilities, expounding and formalising it in the Creed of Nicea and using it as a test of christological orthodoxy. The narrative suggested by those few words operated as the hermeneutical key to the interpretation of all else that was said of Christ's person. On the other hand, one could argue that those who were dissatisfied with orthodox christology and developed an alternative along inspirational

lines, were in fact implicitly operating with a quite different master-story' essentially of the form, 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power'. It was the inherent difficulty in bringing these two stories together into one coherent account that led to most christologies having either an inspirational or incarnational form.

The significance of Owen's christology is that it makes possible the incorporation of these two master-stories into one narrative. The respective missions of the Son and the Spirit to the world, in particular as they are considered with respect to the human nature of Christ, were not perceived as mutually exclusive accounts but rather as complementing one another. They can therefore be woven into one story which we might summarise as, 'The Holy Spirit formed, sanctified and energised the human nature which the eternal Son had assumed into personal subsistence with himself'. The narrative of the incarnation is thus incomplete apart from the story of the Spirit's mission to renew the divine image in Christ as a prototype of what he would do in the Church.

But we suggest that the bringing together of these two master-stories into one coherent narrative is in effect what is required when we speak of the need to harmonise the concepts of incarnation and inspiration, for it is to these stories that the concepts refer.

Owen's theology, however, also allows us to broaden the perspective and recognise that it is not simply the action of the Son and the Spirit with respect to the human nature of Christ that can be integrated into one story. For underlying this there are the two great themes that encompass the whole redemptive work of God, that is, the respective missions of the Son and of the Spirit into the world. Now these should be seen, not as two quite distinct or unrelated movements, but as themselves complementary aspects of a more comprehensive account. The Father has indeed sent the Son for us and given the Spirit to us, yet these are in fact simply two branches of the one great covenantal promise that God will be our God and we will be his people.\*7

We would, therefore, argue that it is the comprehensive nature and in particular trinitarian determination of Owen's theology that ultimately both leads him to, and provides the basis for, his integration of what

we have described as an incarnational and an inspirational christology.

If Owen's work was indeed successful in holding together both these ways of understanding the person of Christ, it has far reaching implications for the whole christological debate. Our immediate task, however, is to consider some of the difficulties which are suggested by his christology and examine to what extent he is able to meet them.

### 9. Integrity of the Person

One of the theological problems which appears to arise from Owen's argument concerns the integrity of Christ's person. By so emphasizing the distinct operation of his two natures was he not repeating the Nestorian error and in effect implying the existence of two persons?

In his exposition of the incarnation Owen outlined the Alexandrian argument for the ontological integrity of Christ by describing the union of his divine and human natures as a hypostatic union. The incarnate Christ is thereby one being, one individual entity.

Nevertheless in the description above there appears to be two distinct agents active in that one being. There is both the giver and the receiver of the Spirit, God with us and the prototype man of faith totally dependent on God. Does this mean that there is a dual agency in Christ? Owen looks to the role of Christ as Mediator to understand how the activity in his two natures is integrated.

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## NOTES to CHAPTER THREE

- 1 William Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, Macmillan and Co., Ltd. (London, 1912), p.36.
- 2 See Robert Barclay, *The Chief Principles of the Christian religion, as professed by the people called the Quakers*, quoted in, *Documents of the Christian Church*, selected and edited by Henry Bettenson, Oxford University Press (London, 1967). Of particular importance is his description of the relation of the Scriptures to the Spirit. "Nevertheless, as that which giveth a true and faithful testimony of the first foundation they (the Scriptures) are and may be esteemed a secondary rule, subordinate to the Spirit from which they have all their excellency and certainty...", p.253.
- 3 Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Religion* (1678), *Barclay's Apology in Modern English*, Ed. by Dean Freiday, Friends Book Store (Philadelphia, 1967), p.25.
- 4 Geoffrey F.Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience*, Basil Blackwell (Oxford, 1946), p.26.
- 5 Mark Pattison, quoted by G R Cragg, *From Puritanism to the Age of Reason, A study of changes in religious thought within the Church of England 1660 to 1700*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 1950), p.118.
- 6 See Cragg, p.31.
- 7 John Owen, *Pneumatologia: or, A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit*, Works 3, p.39.
- 8 Works 3, p.39.
- 9 Nuttall, p.viii.
- 10 Works 3, p.23.
- 11 Works 3, p.25.
- 12 Works 3, p.26.
- 13 Works 3, p.26.
- 14 Works 3, p.27.
- 15 Owen, *Christologia: or, A Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ*, Works 1, p.75.
- 16 Works 3, p.334.
- 17 Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Religion*, p.7.
- 18 Emil Brunner, *The Mediator*, E.T. by Olive Wyon, Lutterworth Press (London and Redhill, 1942), p.220.
- 19 Kierkegaard's comment is well known. "If the contemporary generation had left behind them nothing but the words, 'we have believed that in such and such a year God appeared among us in the humble figure of servant, that he lived and taught in our community, and finally died', it would be more than enough." Whether he actually meant this is open to doubt, but the idea was certainly taken up seriously by a later generation of 'Dialectic Theologians'. Quoted by D.M.Baillie, in *God was in Christ*, Faber and Faber Ltd. (London, 1961), p.49.
- 20 Works 3, p.27.
- 21 Owen, *Vindicae Evangelicae; or The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated and Socinianism Examined*, Works 12, pp.208ff.
- 22 Works 3, p.27.
- 23 John V.Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, SCM Press Ltd. (London, 1973), p.18.
- 24 Taylor, p.39.
- 25 Ibid., p.83.
- 26 Basil of Caesarea, *On the Spirit*, NPNF, second series, vol. VIII,

- xvi 38, p.23.
- 27 Works 3, p.98.
- 28 Works 3, p.102.
- 29 Works 3, p.126.
- 30 Works 3, p.151.
- 31 Works 3, p.189.
- 32 Alasdair I.C.Heron, *The Holy Spirit: The Holy Spirit in the Bible, in the History of Christian Thought and in recent Theology*, Marshall Morgan & Scott (London, 1983), p.42.
- 33 Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. 3, p.468.
- 34 *Hebrews* 3, p.422.
- 35 See Works 1, pp.199ff.
- 36 Owen's argument is not original. Theodore of Mopsuestia had taught that: "God the Logos was made man that He might therein make the humanity the likeness of God, and that He might therein renew [the likeness of God] in the nature of the humanity; and thereupon He renewed His material elements, and showed Him [to be] without sin in the observance of the commandments, as though He alone sufficed for renewing him who has originally fallen by the transgression of the observance of the commandments." Quoted by R.V.Sellers, *Two Ancient Christologies: A study in the christological thought of the schools of Alexandria and Antioch in the early history of Christian doctrine*, SPCK (London, 1954), p.128.
- 37 Works 1, pp.170ff.
- 38 G.Carlyle, ed., *The Collected Writings of Edward Irving in Five Volumes*, vol.V, Alexander Strachan (London, 1865), p.4.
- 39 Ibid., p.128.
- 40 Works 3, p.139.
- 41 Works 3, p.189.
- 42 Works 3, p.163.
- 43 See Yves M J Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, E.T. by David Smith, Geoffrey Chapman (London, 1986), p.97.
- 44 Works 3, p.164.
- 45 Works 3, p.167.
- 46 Works 3, p.167.
- 47 Works 3, p.168.
- 48 Calvin also wrestled with the question of why it was necessary that Christ should be sanctified by the Spirit from the womb. "We do not hold Christ to be free from all taint, merely because he was born of a woman unconnected with a man, but because he was sanctified by the Spirit, so that the generation was pure and spotless, such as it would have been before Adam's fall. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II xiii 4, E.T. by Henry Beveridge, Wm.B.Eerdmans Publishing Company (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1970), p.414.
- 49 Works 3, p.169.
- 50 Works 3, p.169.
- 51 Works 3, p.170.
- 52 Works 3, p.171.
- 53 Works 3, p.172.
- 54 Works 3, p.174.
- 55 Works 3, p.174.
- 56 Works 3, p.175.
- 57 Works 3, p.177.
- 58 Works 3, pp.177-179.
- 59 Works 3, p.180.
- 60 Works 3, p.182.

- 61 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, ANF, second series, vol. I, III xix  
3, p.449.
- 62 Otterly interprets Irenaeus here as making a distinction between  
the *status exinanitionis* and Christ's glorification. Although  
this idea is included, I believe Irenaeus also holds that both  
principles, the Word and the Man, are active in the incarnate  
life on earth. Robert Otterly, *The Doctrine of the Incarnation*,  
fifth edition, Meuthen & Co.Ltd. (London, 1911), p.214.
- 63 Works 3, pp.160ff.
- 64 Works 3, p.23.
- 65 Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints Perseverance Explained and  
Confirmed*, Works 11, p.232.
- 66 Works 11, p.232.
- 67 Works 11, p.232.



## IV

## THE MEDIATOR

*One person acting in two natures*

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men - the testimony given in its proper time. (I Tim. i. 5, 6)

If Christ is the mediator between God and man, does this require that he is in his own being both divine and human, and if it does how can we conceive of his redemptive activity as that of just one person? Or more precisely, how is a christology which is based on the 'two nature' theory able to treat of Christ's saving work as that of a single agent? We begin by considering the manner in which two classical soteriologies have done so, for they highlight the inherent difficulties of the task and provide an illuminating introduction to the way in which Owen was to interpret the agency of Christ's saving activity.

1. Athanasius - *The Incarnation of the Word of God*

The shape and content of any particular soteriology is usually dependent on the interpretation given of man's predicament in the world. Athanasius believed that as a consequence of the Fall man had lost God's image and that this had brought to his being corruption, death and finally a return to non-existence.<sup>1</sup> These ideas of corruption and death consequently played a determining role in his exposition of Christ's work as Redeemer.

Thus taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered his body to death in place of all, and offered it to the Father.... This he did that he might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of his resurrection. Thus he would make death to disappear from them as utterly as

straw from the fire.<sup>3</sup>

Man was also faced with the loss of all true knowledge of God. The divine image had been in him a representation of God's likeness, and without it he no longer had any apprehension of his Maker.<sup>3</sup> This spiritual desolation was compounded by the cosmological rebellion arising from the Fall, whereby Athanasius understood the air to have become the sphere of the devil, who with the other evil spirits tried both to keep souls from the truth and to hinder the progress of those who were trying to follow it.<sup>4</sup> Athanasius does make mention of man's broken relationship with God and refers to the concepts of ransom and sacrifice, but this was a secondary idea in his exposition and is subservient to the central theme of man's loss and recovery of immortality.

Now, Athanasius argued that each of these difficulties facing man in his fallen condition could only be met and overcome through the action of the divine Son, for:

...only the Image of the Father could re-create the likeness of the Image in men, that none save our Lord Jesus Christ could give to mortals immortality, and that only the Word Who orders all things and is alone the Father's true and sole-begotten Son could teach men about him and abolish the worship of idols....having proved his Godhead by His works, He might offer the sacrifice on behalf of all, surrendering His own temple to death in place of all, to settle man's account with death and free him from the primal transgression.<sup>5</sup>

It is apparent that the agent in all of Christ's saving activity is held by Athanasius to be the divine Word. The human body assumed in the incarnation is real and necessary in order that the corruption in mankind might be overcome, but it is always only an instrument of the Word.

He, the Mighty One, the Artificer of all, Himself prepared this body in the virgin as a temple for Himself, and took it for His very own, as the instrument through which He was known and in which He dwelt.<sup>6</sup>

This is evident in his explanation of the death of Christ: "He surrendered his body to death in place of all, and offered it to the Father".<sup>7</sup> The agent is the Word who although active in the death of his body is ultimately untouched by it himself.

He Himself was unhurt by this, for He is impassible and incorruptible; but by His own impassibility He kept and healed the suffering men on whose account He thus suffered.<sup>8</sup>

It would seem then that Athanasius had no difficulty in integrating the activity of Jesus Christ, for he constantly assumed that the subject of all his deeds was simply the divine Word or Son of God. Even dying was understood as an act of the Word surrendering his body to death and offering it to the Father. The strength of his christology lay in its ability to satisfy the requirements of his underlying soteriology. The impassible Word of God, present among us in a human body which he gave over to death, was able to bring to us immortality, often spoken of as divinisation, knowledge of God and the defeat of the demonic powers, as he settled our debt with death on the cross.

It was, however, a shift in the generally accepted soteriology of the time that first suggested the weakness of this form of christology. The belief developed that the actual assumption of human nature by the Word of God was not merely a means towards our salvation or divinisation, but a direct cause of it. The salvation of human nature, therefore, lay in its assumption by the eternal Word. Now this meant that the Church had to think through what was involved in Christ assuming a complete human nature, that is one which included a human mind or soul. It was not just a body which the Word took to himself, but human emotions and a human will.

However, it appears to me that the radical implications of this development were not fully recognised by the Church at large and that those in the Alexandrian tradition continued to use a sophisticated form of the Athanasian christology, in which the agency of the incarnate Christ was implicitly if not explicitly simply referred to the eternal Word.

The direction in which soteriology was to develop in the West, however, precluded the possibility of such a procedure.

## 2. Anselm - *Why was God made Man?*

For Anselm the major difficulty confronting man in this life was not considered primarily to be his subjection to mortality, but rather his estrangement from God arising from his sins. It was from this perspective that his soteriology was developed.

He redeemed us from our sins, and from His wrath, and from hell, and from the power of the devil...<sup>9</sup>

Although there is some overlap here with the concerns of Athanasius, it is immediately apparent that there has been a significant shift in emphasis from the question of immortality to the problem of our relation with God. The model underlying Anselm's understanding of this relation is that of a servant to his feudal lord to whom he owes satisfaction in the event of any failure to render the homage that is due to him. Consequently he argued that as a rational creature man's whole will ought to be subject to the will of God. "And thus to sin is nothing else but not to repay to God one's debt."<sup>10</sup> In sinning, therefore, man has defrauded and thereby dishonoured God. This creates the central problem for man - how shall the outstanding debt to God be paid?

It is therefore necessary that either the honour abstracted shall be restored, or punishment shall follow; otherwise God were either unjust to Himself, or were powerless for either, which it is a shame even to imagine.<sup>11</sup>

The satisfaction required by God must bear a direct proportion to the sin committed, whose gravity is in turn related to the dignity of the person offended.<sup>12</sup> This level of satisfaction, although required of man, lies outside human possibilities. Being a payment "which God only can, and man only should, make, it is needful that it should be made by one who is both God and man".<sup>13</sup>

Man must therefore freely give something of infinite value to God which is not already owed to Him.<sup>14</sup> Christ was able to do this by freely offering him his life. This effectively repaid the debt which man owed to God, for the life of Christ was more deserving of love than sins are hateful.<sup>15</sup>

We see then that Anselm tended to treat Christ's human nature as the agent of his saving activity. Divinity was necessary to his person so that the act of satisfaction might have the required value, but it calls for the deed of a man, a deed whereby man as creature honours God as creator. Thus, in his analysis of Christ's death, Anselm interpreted it as an act of his humanity towards his divinity, the human nature dies, the divine nature as one of the Trinity receives the offering.<sup>16</sup> It is only by linguistic convention, on account of the unity of Christ's person, that we ascribe the act of mediation also to God.

But granting that what Man did, God is said to have done, (on account of the unity of Person:)...<sup>17</sup>

Anselm did not, then, seem to have any real difficulty in treating Christ's saving activity as that of a single agent, for he refers its agency constantly to his human nature. The will that chose freely to give its life was a human will, while the life itself was itself considered as fully human, having a natural immortality not through its divinity, but because it was untainted by the Fall. The subject of Christ's saving work was generally perceived to be a man, albeit a man personally united with God.

We are not implying that Anselm ever denied a divine nature of Christ, or suggested that his divinity was wholly extraneous to his redemptive work. On the contrary he held, as we have seen, that as the satisfaction Christ offered was one that only God can make and that only man should make, "it is needful that it should be made by one who is both God and man."<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless the difference between his soteriology and that of Athanasius is remarkable. Whereas Anselm tended to conceive Christ's redeeming work as the deed of a man who was united with God, Athanasius viewed it as the action of the eternal Word

indwelling a human body.

Both theologians were able to consider Christ as a single agent by implicitly referring the agency of his saving work to either the divine Word or to the Man assumed. The need to attribute Christ's saving action exclusively to either one or the other of his two natures is a dilemma which some theologians still find confronting them today. Brian Hebblethwaite is an articulate representative of those who would follow the Athanasian alternative.

It emerges that much depends on what one sees as the primary subject of christological statements. It is no good suggesting that Jesus, qua God, could do this, and, qua man, could do that. That would already be to confuse the natures by predicating unlimited divinity of the man instead of predicating real humanity of God incarnate. *The primary subject of all christological statements is God.* It is God qua God, who cannot die, and it is God incarnate, i.e. God, qua man, who suffers and dies for our salvation. Nor is there any question of sundering the natures here, when it is made quite clear that we are not talking of two separate individuals, but of the divine substance, which is such as to include within its own subjectivity, the human subject, Jesus, as the expression and vehicle of God's incarnate life.<sup>19</sup> (my italics)

However, where the salvation wrought by Christ is recognised to be the action of both God and man in Christ's person, incorporating the soteriological perspectives of both Athanasius and Anselm, then the above manoeuvre is no longer effective and we must think anew of how we are to maintain the integrity of his action.

### 3. Calvin - Incorporating both perspectives

It is in the theology of John Calvin that we find this dual perspective, with its emphasis on the dramatic action of both God and man in the redemptive work of Christ.

It was his to swallow up death: who but Life could do so? It was his to conquer sin: who could do so save Righteousness itself? It was his to put to flight the powers of the air and the world: who could do so but the mighty power superior to both? But who possesses life and righteousness, and the dominion and government of heaven, but God alone? Therefore God, in his infinite mercy, having determined to redeem us, became himself our Redeemer in the person of his only-begotten Son. Another principal part of our reconciliation with God was, that man, who had lost himself by his disobedience, should by way of remedy, oppose to it obedience, satisfy the justice of God, and pay the penalty of sin....Finally, since as God only he could not suffer, and as man only could not overcome death, he united the human nature with the divine, that he might subject the weakness of the one to death as an expiation of sin, and by the power of the other, maintaining a struggle with death, might gain us the victory.<sup>20</sup>

However, if the action of both God and man in Christ's saving work are emphasised in this way, how are we to conceive of the subject or agent of his activity? Although Calvin did not deal with this question directly he did imply that this redemptive action should not be referred simply to Christ's divine or human nature but to his person in his office as Mediator, re-emphasising the christological model which had been much used by the Latin fathers.<sup>21</sup>

Let us, therefore, regard it as the key of true interpretation, that those things which refer to the office of Mediator are not spoken of the divine or human nature simply.<sup>22</sup>

It is the idea implied here, that the person of Christ in his role as Mediator is the agent of the saving work accomplished in both his natures, which John Owen recognised to be so crucial for christology and which he, therefore, went on to develop as a foundation of his own theology. The essence of Owen's argument was that the actions of both God and man in Christ must be referred to one subject or agent, that is to his person as Mediator.

The divine and human nature in Christ have but one personal subsistence; and so are but one Christ, one distinct personal

principle of all operations, of all that he did or doth as mediator.<sup>23</sup> Whatever acts are ascribed to him, however immediately performed, in or by the human nature, or in and by his divine nature, they are all the acts of that one person, in whom are both these natures.<sup>24</sup>

Does so simple a strategy solve the problem of agency in Christ's saving activity? It certainly raises a number of important issues that need to be examined more thoroughly. Let us, then, consider in outline Owen's discussion of Christ's role as Mediator as it relates to our understanding of his personal agency.

#### 4. The office of Mediator

By the *Mediator* Owen referred in the first place to the role or office instituted by God, by means of which he would reconcile his people to himself. In keeping with the Reformed tradition Owen understood it as three-fold, incorporating into one the major religious functions of the Old Testament tradition, that is, the offices of prophet, priest and king. It was this office which the eternal Son, as an act of humility, freely condescended to make his own that through it he might accomplish his Father's redemptive purpose. Thus Owen maintained that it "is by the exercise and discharge of the office of Christ - as the king, priest, and prophet of the church - that we are redeemed, sanctified, and saved".<sup>25</sup>

What was the theological motivation for this emphasis on the concept of office? It was recognised that the actions of Christ were not of themselves able to provide a sufficient explanation of the efficacy of his passion, rather they needed to be interpreted in the light of God's covenant, that is the Father's free decision to be gracious to men under the righteous terms which he had appointed. The Son's role or office as Mediator is the basis of that covenant, for the Father had eternally appointed it to be so, and therein lies its power to accomplish what was intended in it. For apart from the office into which he was inaugurated, the action of Christ would have been ineffective. For instance, taken by itself his penal suffering



"absolutely considered, without respect unto the ends of the covenant, would neither have been good in itself, nor have had any tendency unto the glory of God; for what excellency of the nature of God could have been demonstrated in the penal sufferings of one absolutely and in all respects innocent?"<sup>26</sup>

The theory underlying this argument was derived in part from medieval nominalism, of which William Courtenay gives a helpful summary.

Causal efficacy results not from forces or inherent virtues placed within created things but rather from a value which God ascribes to things and which he rewards on the basis of covenant or agreement with creation and the church.<sup>27</sup>

It means that the death of Christ is not to be interpreted merely in terms of the direct influence it had on the political, social and religious realities of that time or of its exemplary significance for future ages. Rather it has abiding value and efficacy in that it constituted God's new covenant with his people.

Owen, however, was far from being a thorough-going nominalist and argued that the offices to which Christ was appointed could, nevertheless, not of themselves wholly explain how he was able to accomplish what was intended in them and were, therefore, unable to adequately account for his universal significance.

"God gave of old both kings, priests, and prophets, unto the church. He both anointed them unto their offices, directed them in their discharge, was present with them in their work, and accepted of their duties; yet by none of them, nor by all of them together, was the church supernaturally enlightened, internally ruled, or eternally saved: nor could it be."<sup>28</sup>

? In short, Christ's mediatorial office, represented in terms of prophet, priest and king, does not of itself sufficiently explain the effectiveness of his saving activity.

## 5. The Person of the Mediator

We need, then, to consider not just the nature of the office of the Mediator, but also his person; "from thence alone all power and efficacy is derived, and transfused into his offices, and into all that is due in the discharge of them."<sup>20</sup>

Much of Owen's christology depends on or flows from this simple idea, "The church is saved by his offices because they are his."<sup>20</sup> And many who disagree with Owen's conclusions might well find that the differences they have with him stem from a divergence at this point. The idea in its essence is that the particular power or efficacy of Christ's work is derived primarily from his person and only secondarily from his function or office. Conversely we might say that his office or function owes its effectiveness to the nature of his person.

How does he establish so important a principle? We have seen above that he argued that the various functions or offices which Christ filled had long since been operative in the church and yet were never able to accomplish what the Son was to do as Mediator.

Some of them - as Moses in particular - had as much power, and as great a presence of God with him, as any mere man could be made partaker of; yet was he not in his ministry the saviour of the church - nor could he be so any otherwise than typically and temporally.<sup>21</sup>

Christ was fitted to redeem the Church for unlike Moses he was in his person a son and not merely a servant. Owen maintained that the primary aim of the book of Hebrews was to demonstrate the truth of this one principle:

That the glorious excellency of the person of Christ doth enable him, in the discharge of his offices, to accomplish those ends, - which none other, though vested with the same offices, could, in the exercise of them, attain unto - is the sum and substance of the doctrinal part of that discourse.<sup>22</sup>

Without, at this stage, entering into a detailed discussion of the

argument of the letter to the Hebrews, it seems to me that his thesis is difficult to overturn. Even a cursory outline of the contents of the epistle would suggest that it was the purpose of the author to establish the superiority of Christ's person to the angels, to Moses and to the Levitical priesthood, along with his close alliance to mankind, as the basis for proving the greater efficacy of his priestly sacrifice to that offered by the Levites.

Now if the effectiveness of his redemptive work in his role as mediator is dependent on his person, what is it that we must say about it? Owen draws our attention to the two things that are required of Christ's person so that his mediatorial office might be effective in the salvation of the church.

a. a human nature

He held that, "The first of these is, that he should have a nature provided for him which was originally not his own. For in his divine nature, singly considered, he had no such relation unto them for whom he was to discharge his offices, as was necessary to communicate the benefit of them, nor could he discharge their principal duties."<sup>33</sup>

These duties derive from the nature of man's predicament. We have seen earlier that Owen believed dishonour has been brought to God's wisdom, holiness and justice by the disobedience of mankind. The image of God wherein we were created has been defaced, rebellion has arisen against his rule and government and the law representing the holiness of his own being has been broken. So it is fitting for God's glory that through human nature his image be restored, that punishment be received proportionable in justice to the demerit of sin and that the law be fulfilled by obedience. The nature that has so demeaned and despised God's holiness should now more fully exalt it and conspicuously represent it.<sup>34</sup>

But a human nature is also necessary if Christ is to be related to us in a way that enables us to benefit from his work. "For hereby he became our *goel* - the next of kin - unto whom belonged the right of redemption, and from whom alone we could claim relief and succour in

our lost condition."<sup>35</sup> This relationship of brotherhood or kinship depends on us sharing not only the same nature as Christ, but the same common stock or parentage. If God had made a new man out of nothing or from the dust of the ground, even though that man shared our nature there would be no "cognition or alliance between him and us, so that we should be any way concerned in what he did or suffered."<sup>36</sup> To be able to call us brethren it was necessary that he be born of a woman.

Owen is aware that if Christ is to be mediator between man and God he must take upon himself not only man's nature but also enter his condition of suffering and temptation. He had experience of the weakness, sorrows, and miseries of human nature under the assaults of temptations; "...he tried it, felt it, and will never forget it."<sup>37</sup> Thereby he was qualified to be merciful and faithful in his office of high priest. Owen is, however, careful to allow some distinction between the experience of Christ and that of all other men, for he remained without sin even though he truly suffered under temptation as we do.

In short, it was necessary that the work of mediation should be accomplished by a human, so as to fulfil man's required duties and also to establish a relationship with those who are to receive its benefits.

#### b. a divine nature

On the other hand, Owen argued that the person of Christ could not have effectively accomplished the work of mediation if he was no more than a man, if he had no nature but ours.

He could not have been the great prophet of the church if he had been merely a man, however exalted or glorious. For as mediator he was to be prophet of the whole church, caring and teaching all the elect of God, "all that shall be saved in all ages and places, from the beginning of the world to the end thereof."<sup>38</sup> This was not possible for a man who was geographically and temporarily confined. Secondly, he was to have a full comprehension of the mind and will of God, of the whole divine counsel, for he was to make him known as one who had seen God. Such knowledge could not reside in any mere creature.<sup>39</sup> Thirdly

as prophet of the church it was necessary that he had power and authority to send the Holy Spirit to make his revelation of divine truth effective in the minds of men. Only he from whom the Holy Spirit proceeded had such authority.<sup>40</sup>

The same is true of his kingly office. The extent of his rule over the whole creation of God, with all power in heaven and earth cannot be conceived of in one who is only man. This is particularly true of his internal and spiritual rule over the minds, souls and consciences of all believers.

There is no one gracious acting of soul in any one believer, at any time in the whole world, either in opposition unto sin or the performance of duty, but it is influenced and under the guidance of the kingly power of Christ.<sup>41</sup>

Human nature alone is also inadequate in accounting for the effectiveness of his priestly office. Although he offered himself a sacrifice for us in and by his human nature, it was not simply the work of a man, by one offering of himself, to expiate the sins of the whole church and forever to perfect them that are sanctified.<sup>42</sup>

Once we grant to Owen his earlier thesis that Christ's mediatorial role is dependent for its efficacy on his person or being, his argument leads naturally to the conclusion that if Christ indeed rules, enlightens and redeems the whole church of God, then he must in his own person be both divine and human.

The traditional shape of Owen's apologetic here must not be allowed to dull our minds to the full implications of the argument. If we ask Anselm's question, 'Why did God become man?', the answer given is that his work of mediation required the being and deeds of one who was human and divine. This, then, was not something that God could do as God. For humanity is not an aspect of the divine nature, or a natural predicate of God's essence. A 'becoming' had to take place. In the language of the tradition it is said that a human nature, which is other than his own, had to be assumed. The 'humanity of God' is an expression which is, therefore, only appropriate when applied

specifically to the incarnate Christ. Far from being a timeless truth of God's eternal essence, it is a reality of our history "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched".

Owen's soteriology was, therefore, of the same sort as that of John Calvin, emphasising that Christ's mediatorial work included in it the action of both God and man. To the question, 'How are we then to understand his saving activity as that of a single agent?' he responded, as we indicated above, by referring the actions immediately performed in both natures to the person of the Mediator as the one distinct personal principle of all operations.

But what is meant by the person of the Mediator, is he in some way different from the person of the eternal Son?

## 6. From Logos to Mediator

We now enter one of the most interesting, and I think valuable, areas of Owen's christology. The matter before us relates to the susception, or taking to himself, by the divine Logos of the office of Mediator.

We have seen how Owen argued that in the susception of his office it was necessary that the Word or eternal Son should assume a human nature as his own. Now what were the implications of this assumption of human nature for the person of the Word? Great care had been taken by the orthodox fathers in the patristic debates to emphasise that the incarnation did not entail any change to the being of the Word.<sup>43</sup> So far Owen fully upheld the tradition. He argued that:

a. This condescension of the Son of God did not consist in a laying aside, or parting with, or *separation from*, the divine nature, so as that he should cease to be God by being man.

b. Much less did this condescension consist in the *conversion of the divine nature into the human...*

c. There was not in this condescension the least *change* or alteration in the divine nature.<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, Owen recognised that the incarnation must also be conceived of as a development or a 'becoming' of the person of the Word. But this had to be formulated in a way which did not imply any change or loss to the divine nature.

This, then, is the foundation of the glory of Christ in this condescension, the life and soul of all heavenly truth and mysteries, - namely, that the Son of God becoming in time what he was not, the Son of man, ceased not thereby to be what he was, even the eternal Son of God.<sup>45</sup>

What is significant for our study is that Owen was able to affirm of the Word that there is a sense in which he *became in time what he was not*. In short, there is a distinction between Christ's person absolutely considered as he is the eternal Son of God, and as he became the Mediator, the God-man. It is a distinction that Owen insists is essential to the Gospel.

To deny the person of Christ to fall under this double consideration - of a divine person absolutely, wherein he is "over all, God blessed for ever," and, as manifested in the flesh, exercising the office of mediator between God and man - is to renounce the Gospel.<sup>46</sup>

It seems that such a dual perspective of Christ's person, considered both as Mediator and as eternal Son is essential if we are to understand how in his ministry among us he is dependent on God and therefore subordinate to him; why his authority needed to be given to him rather than being his by nature; how in his person he prays, learns obedience through suffering and experiences death; even as he also forgives men their sins, teaches with divine authority and bestows the Holy Spirit on his people. All this happens to his person as he is Mediator. It is the person of the Mediator, the God-man, that dies on the cross. Does this imply that the immortal God suffers death? No, Owen answers, but the person who is both God and man, dies in his human nature:

...none affirming that Christ died any otherwise than in his human nature, though he who is God died therein.<sup>47</sup>

For Owen, therefore, the subject of all these actions is neither simply the divine or human nature, but the person of the Mediator, in whom both these natures subsist. God cannot die, man cannot bestow the Spirit, but he who in his own person is God and man is the subject of both of these mediatory acts. This interpretation of Christ's activity is quite different from the early tendency in the Antiochene tradition, which in its emphasis on the distinct operation of the two natures, struggled to find any unifying basis for Christ's actions. For example, Eustathius emphasised that the divine nature did not die.

The God dwelling in him was not led like a lamb to the slaughter nor killed like a sheep, since he is by nature invisible....For it is not right to say that the Word of God died.<sup>48</sup>

But he could only point to a man as the subject of death. Owen, however, although agreeing that God as God did not die, was always quick to emphasise that the person who was God did suffer death.

Was Owen here in danger of postulating a third principle neither divine nor human as the nature or being of the Mediator, or to use his own expression, has there been a "blending of natures into one common principle of operation"?<sup>49</sup> The theory that in Christ there was only one mode of activity, *mia energia*, had been put forward in the seventh century as a compromise between the Monophysites and the Chalcedonians, but was rejected for it inevitably led to understanding Christ as a *tertium quid* who was neither God nor man. Owen, however, was always careful to avoid any suggestion that there was an amalgamation or fusion of Christ's divine and human nature. They remain separate and operate distinctly, even though all Christ's redemptive work must be considered as the act of his whole person. He was careful to emphasise each of these perspectives:

a. Each nature doth preserve its own natural, essential properties, entirely unto and in itself...The divine nature is not made temporary, finite, limited, subject to passion or



alteration by this union; nor is the human nature rendered immense, infinite, omnipotent.

b. Each nature operates in him according unto its essential properties. The divine nature knows all things, upholds all things, rules all things, acts by its presence everywhere; the human nature was born, yielded obedience, died, and rose again.

c. The perfect, complete work of Christ, in every act of his mediatory office...is not to be considered as the act of this or that nature in him alone, but it is the act and work of the whole person.<sup>50</sup>

How, then, does Owen integrate these rather different ideas, on the one hand that each nature operates according to its own characteristic properties, and on the other that the principle of operation of all Christ's saving activity is that of his whole person?

#### 7. The Mediator as agent

Key to Owen's exposition, was a distinction he made between the particular acts of Christ's life and death considered in themselves, and the effects of these acts in making atonement or satisfaction for sin and in reconciling us to God. The atonement or satisfaction of Christ was not simply the act of one or the other of his natures. Rather,

...it is the *apotelesma* or effect of the actings, the doing and suffering of Christ - the dignity of what he did in reference unto the end for which he did it."<sup>51</sup>

For instance, Christ suffered physical death in his human nature, but that death is able to constitute our reconciliation with God only because it is the act of his person, God and man, and it is from his person that it receives ~~it~~ dignity, value and efficacy. To clarify this rather complex idea he invites us in all the mediatory actions of Christ to consider:-

- a. The agent; and that is the person of Christ.
- b. The immediate principle by which and from which the agent works; and that is the natures in the person.
- c. The actions; which are the effectual operations of either nature.
- d. The effect or work with respect to God and us; and this relates to the person of the agent, the Lord Christ, God and man.<sup>53</sup>

Through this simple but illuminating analysis of Christ's activity, a theory is formulated which aims to hold together both aspects of the christological problem. On the one hand, the person of Christ as mediator between God and man, is one distinct hypostasis or person and is as such the agent or *principium quo* of all his redemptive action. On the other hand, in his person there subsists a divine and a human nature, which as they each operate according to their own characteristic properties are the immediate principles or *principium quod* of all that he does.<sup>54</sup> In summary,

(W)hatever he doth in and about our salvation, it is done by that one person, God and man...Whatever acts are ascribed unto him, however immediately performed, in or by the human nature, or in and by his divine nature, they are all acts of that one person, in whom are both these natures."<sup>54</sup>

## 8. Evaluation

The aim of this chapter has been to consider whether Owen was able to maintain successfully the unity of Christ's personal action. He strongly opposed the direction taken by Nestorius, who was believed to have implied that there were in Christ two sons, divine and human. Perhaps Owen was aware that his own emphasis on the reality of the two natures of Christ could itself so easily collapse into the form of christology associated with Nestorius, if he did not carefully and vigorously defend the unity of his person. The two-fold argument he used to do so is, in fact, summarised in his attack on Nestorianism.

But the personal union between these two natures they (the Nestorians) denied....But that the Son of God assumed our nature into personal subsistence with himself - whereby (the) whole Christ was one person, and all his mediatory acts were the acts of that one person, of him who was both God and man - this they would not acknowledge."<sup>55</sup>

Owen held that Christ's unity is in the first place an ontological one. Christ is only one entity, one being, his two natures forming a hypostatic union, that is, a union in one person. He offers a summary of the argument.

That the person of the Son of God did not, in his assuming human nature to be his own, take an individual person of any one into a near conjunction with himself, but preventing the personal subsistence of human nature in that flesh which he assumed, he gave it its subsistence in his own person; whence it hath its individuation and distinction from all other persons whatever. This is the personal union. The divine and human nature in Christ have but one personal subsistence; and so are but one Christ, one distinct personal principle of all operations, of all that he did or doth as mediator.<sup>56</sup>

As we have seen, it is this ontological unity of person which Owen believes is the ground for the integrity of Christ's action. As the person is ultimately one so is his activity in all his redemptive work.

However, one of the difficulties in the use of the word 'person' in this context is its ambiguity. Owen employed it with reference to Christ in a technical sense to signify an individual, distinct, subsisting entity, in much the same way that patristic theologians often used the Greek equivalent *hypostasis*. He was, however, not always consistent in this use and the idea of a person as one who thinks, wills and responds in a rational manner was sometimes also present. His argument on occasion appears to me to move from one to the other of these ideas without sufficient warrant.

An added confusion is that the modern reader usually brings to this

discussion a rather different conception of 'person', largely influenced by the nineteenth century advance in psychology. The prestige acquired by this branch of study has meant that the notion of person is often identified with a more or less clearly formed psychological model of human constitution and behaviour. Consequently the method of some modern christology has been to use this conceptual model of 'person' as the key to explicate the God-man 'person' of Christ. One of the many attempts to reconstruct christology in this way is suggested in the following theses of Dr. Sanday, quoted by Maurice Relton.

(1) 'That the proper seat or *locus* of all divine indwelling, or divine action upon the human soul, is the subliminal consciousness.'

(2) 'That the same, or a corresponding, subliminal consciousness is the proper seat or *locus* of the Deity of the incarnate Christ.'<sup>57</sup>

But this seems to me to miss the point. Our understanding of human psychology is relevant to our interpretation of Christ Jesus the man, that is, his human nature, for in that sense he is a person just as we are. But this psychological structure must, by the very nature of the case, be inadequate to model the whole reality or 'person' of one who is both God and man. We surely cannot allow the word 'person' when applied to the Mediator to be totally determined and therefore limited to our understanding of human psychology. So too, Owen's analysis of Christ's action must not be judged as deficient simply because it cannot be successfully translated into this structure.

A second concern relates to the status ascribed by Owen to the natures of Christ. Arthur Headlam maintains that 'nature' can be treated either as an abstraction, the expression of something logical, or as the ancients often did, it can be conceived somehow or other as having real existence. "The term nature, then, may be used either formally or materially."<sup>58</sup> Such a neat distinction is probably an oversimplification. D.M. MacKinnon's discussion on 'substance' highlights the complexity of Aristotle's philosophical thinking in this area.<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, I think it is fair to describe Owen's understanding of Christ's natures as having a strong element of realism running through it.

Considered on its own, he implied that the human nature of Christ is an abstraction, but enhypostasised in Christ it has reality. It is an individual, distinct, existing entity. Christ is a real man. Physically, mentally, socially and spiritually he acts and responds as a human. In his life among us Christ Jesus the man, or equivalently his human nature, was an empirically observable reality.

The same is in essence true of his divine being. Of course when we discuss Christ's divine nature we must take seriously the concern of Schleiermacher that the two natures are not to be treated as though they were much the same sort of thing.

For how can divine and human be thus brought together under any single conception, as if they could both be more exact determinations, coordinated to each other, of one and the same universal?<sup>00</sup>

Rather, we do well to remind ourselves of the awesome task involved in attempting to bring to verbal expression the relation of the divine being to human existence in Christ. It is important, it seems to me, to keep before our minds the mystery and ineffability of that being. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition it is consistently understood as majestic, transcendent, and ultimately holy, before the manifestation of which men either took off their shoes, fell on their faces, or cried out in confession of their own unworthiness. Man cannot see God and live. Owen argued that it is this nature with which we have to do in the incarnate Christ.

He is infinitely distanced from us in his person in respect of his divine nature, wherein he is and was 'God over all, blessed for ever.' He did not so become man as to cease to be God. Though he drew a veil over his infinite glory, yet he parted not with it.<sup>01</sup>

The glory and being of God, although hid from our view, was not

'domesticated' in Christ, neither was the reality of his human life and experience translated into some higher form. Like his humanity, the presence of God in Christ was not considered as an abstraction. For when under the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit men are brought to a recognition of it, albeit imperfectly and indirectly, the general response is one of awesome fear; a sense of personal unholiness and a confession of unworthiness; and in the experience of grace there is heartfelt praise and worship. Can that which solicits such a response be in some way less than real? Is it not rather the basis and ground of all reality?

Owen's christology suggests that an appropriate way of 'unpacking' the concept that Jesus Christ is true God and true man, is to describe the one person as having both a divine and a human nature. There are those who although agreeing with the former statement would oppose its explication in terms of nature, as it involves a substantialist conceptuality which is believed to be unhelpful for our understanding of Christ. We will consider this matter more fully in the following chapter.

At present, however, we simply draw attention to the fact that Owen used the idea of 'the two natures' to signify that the one person, Jesus Christ the Mediator, was himself both God and man. He is insistent that these natures are not simply our way of cataloguing the rather different qualities or attributes that inhere in one common subject. They refer, rather, to distinct yet inseparable realities which have their full being in the one person of Christ.

In calling these properties of the several natures in Christ "adverse" or "contrary," they (the Socinians) would insinuate a consideration of them as of qualities in a subject, whose mutual contrariety should prove destructive to the one, if not both, or, by a mixture, cause an exurgency of qualities of another temperature. But neither are these properties such qualities, nor are they inherent in any common subject; but [they are] inseparable adjuncts of the different natures of Christ, never mixed with one another, nor capable of any such thing to eternity, nor ever becoming properties of the other nature, which they belong not unto, though all of them do denominate the person

wherein both the natures do subsist.<sup>82</sup> }

We see, then, that Owen was inclined to interpret the natures of Christ realistically. They were for him a helpful way of conceiving what it meant for one person to be true man and true God. In this chapter we have considered how he used this conception to affirm the soteriological perspectives of both Athanasius and Anselm by referring the agency of Christ's redemptive work not exclusively to God or man, that is to one or the other of the natures, but to the person of the Mediator.

But if the one person of Christ can be coherently conceived as redeeming us through his life-giving action as the incarnate Word and also by his willing and sacrificial obedience as the representative man empowered by the Spirit, it means that christology can be expressed in terms of both incarnation and inspiration, without dissolving either the unity of Christ's person or the integrity of his agency.

## NOTES to CHAPTER FOUR

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- 2 Ibid., 8 p.34.
- 3 Ibid., 11 p.38.
- 4 Ibid., 25 p.55.
- 5 Ibid., 20 pp.48ff.
- 6 Ibid., 8 p.34.
- 7 Ibid., 8 p.34.
- 8 Ibid., 54 p.93.
- 9 Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, John Grant (Edinburgh, 1909), I 6 p.8.
- 10 Ibid. I 11 p.23.
- 11 Ibid., I 14 p.28.
- 12 Ibid., I 21 p.50.
- 13 Ibid., II 6 p.67.
- 14 Ibid., II 11 p.78.
- 15 Ibid., II 14 p.84.
- 16 Ibid., II 18 p.103.
- 17 Ibid., II 19 p.106.
- 18 Ibid., II 6 p.67.
- 19 Brian Hebblethwaite, 'Incarnation and Atonement: The Moral and Religious Value of the Incarnation' in *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued*, Ed. by M. Goulder, SCM Press Ltd. (London, 1979), p.90.
- 20 Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, E.T. by Henry Beveridge, vol. I, Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1970), II 12 2,3 pp.401ff.
- 21 The conception of Christ as the 'Mediator' was a long-standing tradition of the Latin Fathers going back to Tertullian. "Wherever it may be, it (our risen flesh) is in safe keeping in God's presence, through that most faithful 'Mediator between God and man, (the man) Jesus Christ,' who shall reconcile us both to God; the spirit to the flesh, and the flesh to the spirit. Both natures has He already united in His own self; He has fitted them together as bride and bridegroom in the reciprocal bond of wedded life." Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, ANF, volume III, 63 p.593.
- 22 Ibid., II 14 3 p.418.
- 23 John Owen, *A Brief Declaration and Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity: as also of the Person and Satisfaction of Christ: accomodated to the capacity and use of such as may be in danger to be seduced; and the establishment of the truth*, Works 2, p.418.
- 24 Works 2, p.415.
- 25 Owen, *Christologia: or, a Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ*, Works 1, p.84.
- 26 Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol.2, p.89.
- 27 William Courtenay, 'Nominalism', in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Ed. by Alan Richardson & John Bowden, SCM Press Ltd. (London, 1985) p.404.
- 28 Works 1, pp.85ff.
- 29 Works 1, p.85.
- 30 Works 1, p.99.
- 31 Works 1, p.86.



- 32 Works 1, p.85.
- 33 Works 1, p.86.
- 34 See Works 1, pp.169-198.
- 35 Works 1, p.87.
- 36 Works 1, p.198.
- 37 *Hebrews* 3, p.480.
- 38 Works 1, p.87.
- 39 Works 1, p.91.
- 40 Works 1, p.95.
- 41 Works 1, p.98.
- 42 Works 1, p.99.
- 43 Athanasius saw clearly that the incarnation could mean no intrinsic change to the divine nature. "...he did not become other than Himself on taking the flesh, but, being the same as before, He was robed in it..." *Four Discourses against the Arians*, NPNF, second series, volume IV, ii 8 p.352.
- 44 Works 1, pp.325-327.
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- 46 Works 1, p.133.
- 47 *Hebrews* 3, p.361.
- 48 Quoted in Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition, From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, E.T. by John Bowden, volume I, second edition, Mowbrays (London & Oxford, 1975), p.300.
- 49 Works 2, p.433.
- 50 Works 1, p.234.
- 51 Works 2, p.433.
- 52 Works 2, p.433.
- 53 Owen, *On Communion with God, the Father, Son and Holy Ghost*, Works 2, p.51.
- 54 Works 2, pp.414ff.
- 55 Works 1, p.40.
- 56 Works 2, p.418.
- 57 Maurice Relton, *A Study in Christology, The Problem of the Relation of the Two Natures in the Person of Christ*, SPCK (London, 1934), The Macmillan Company (New York), p.201.
- 58 Relton, p.xvi.
- 59 D.M.MacKinnon, "'Substance' in Christology - a cross-bench view' in *Christ Faith and History, Cambridge Studies in Christology*, ed. by S.W.Sykes and J.P.Clayton, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 1978), pp.279-284.
- 60 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. by H.R.MacKintosh & J.S.Stewart, English translation of the second German edition, T.& T.Clarke (Edinburgh, 1976), p.392.
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- 62 Owen, *Vindicae Evangelicae; or The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated and Socinianism examined*, Works 12, pp.209ff.

## THE SON AND THE FATHER

*Of the same being*

We have considered in this thesis how Owen's christology incorporated two rather different ways of understanding Christ's person which we have characterised by the concepts of inspiration and incarnation. Our particular interest is to examine whether these were in fact successfully integrated by him into one coherent christology.

The underlying framework of Owen's exposition was the 'two-nature' theory of Christ's person, a theory which although basic to the Church's christological understanding from the fifth century till modern times has now come under widespread attack. It is commonly believed to be inadequate on two counts: firstly it is internally incoherent, that is, the concepts of one person and of two natures are mutually exclusive; secondly it is dependent on an unhelpful substantialist conceptuality. Early this century P.T.Forsyth expressed his concern with the use of this form of metaphysical language.

The formula of the union of two natures in one person is essentially a metaphysical formula, and the formula of a Hellenistic metaphysic, and it is more or less archaic for the modern mind. The term "nature" is a purely metaphysical term, and one which characterises a scholastic metaphysic of being rather than a modern metaphysic of ethic.<sup>1</sup>

In the last chapter the question of internal coherence was addressed as we considered how the distinct operation of the two natures need not exclude a unity of agency in the person of the Mediator. It was argued that Owen was able to give a consistent account of the integrity of Christ's person within the framework of the two-nature theory.

We now need, however, to consider the second area of concern, that is, whether and in what manner it is necessary to use ontological language and concepts in an exposition of the person of Christ.

## 1. Introduction of the homoousion

More than any other term *homoousios* or 'of one substance' defined the battleground of the great christological debates of the fourth century. Although the concept had been suggested in a theological context before Nicea, (Tertullian had written of the Son's 'unity of substance' with the Father),<sup>2</sup> it was here at the first Ecumenical Council in 325 A.D. that the word was officially introduced to give expression to the relation of the Son to the Father. Novel and lacking Scriptural warrant, it was a term with which few delegates initially felt at home. However, it was soon to dominate theological debate and for the next fifty years most of the contending parties were defined by their relation to it. Finally triumphant, the concept played an explicit role in the Church's christological formulations and consequently determined the parameters of the trinitarian discussion. Thus embedded in the central doctrines of the Church, the homoousion contributed to the dominance of substantial categories in theological thought for more than a thousand years.

Why was the language of 'substance' or 'essence' held to be necessary to define the relation of the Son to the Father? What were the key theological issues in the great Arian debate?

## 2. Arian christology

Any study of the christology of the Arians needs to take into account that these opponents of Catholic orthodoxy are known principally through the writings of their adversaries and are therefore open to possible misrepresentation. Without making such an allowance it is hard to understand how their theology, as it is usually presented, could have had so powerful an influence on a large portion of the Church in the fourth century. Gregg and Groh in their careful study, *Early Arianism*, have done well to suggest just how attractive an option the Arians must have put to the Christian community of their day. Let us look briefly at some of the results of their research.

Their underlying thesis is that the Arians were motivated more by soteriological than cosmological interests.<sup>3</sup> Whereas Athanasius emphasised what has been called the 'physical theory', that is, that the divine Christ came to restore God's image and therefore immortality to man's nature; the Arians understood Christ as the Christian prototype who needed to be imitated if salvation was to be achieved.<sup>4</sup> They saw man as requiring a moral rather than physical transformation, exemplified in Christ, who by faithful service attained oneness with God through the harmony of his will with the divine. Thus Arius argued:

Sharing in a single kind of sonship, Christ is one among many brothers. Therefore, as the Son gained his name "by grace" and was "by adoption" raised by God to himself, likewise other creatures, being faithful in the manner of that "certain one" chosen before time, might be recipients of the Father's favor and glory.<sup>5</sup>

The Arians consequently showed a particular sensitivity to the Biblical portrayal of Christ as one who experienced all the frailties of man. "Thus to the physical limitations of the body the Arians added the full range of psychological and spiritual limitations of a creature, buttressing each of their contentions with a Gospel reference."<sup>6</sup> They acknowledged Jesus' lack of knowledge and his experience of suffering as expressed in his fear and agitation. Positively and in contrast to Athanasius they emphasised his openness to change, by which they indicated his potential for development, his ability to improve and thus grow in wisdom and in grace. Of interest to our study is their awareness of Jesus' need of the Spirit for his own moral growth. Athanasius outlines their position.

...except they shall dare, as commonly, so now to say, that the Son also by participation of the Spirit and by improvement of conduct came to be himself also in the Father.<sup>7</sup>

Although acknowledging him to be pre-existent and the agent of creation, the Arians insisted that the Son was himself a creature.<sup>8</sup> Like all believers he is a son by adoption not by nature.<sup>9</sup> He is

called God in that he participates in divine grace,<sup>10</sup> but they strongly opposed the orthodox expression 'true God'. His divinity, they maintained, was not qualitatively different from that of every Christian.

What then is the nature of the relationship between the Son and the Father? "Conceived relationally rather than ontologically, and marked by dependence rather than coequality, the "kinship" between the Father and the Son for early Arian thinkers is grounded in the conception of the will of God and the faculty of willing."<sup>11</sup> Gregg and Groh believe that the cardinal principle of Arian theology is that all creatures including the Redeemer are ultimately and radically dependent on a Creator whose sole method of relating to his creation was by his will and pleasure. They quote Eusebius of Nicomedia.

There is nothing from his essence, but all things having come into being by his will, each one exists as it was begotten. For on the one hand there is God, but on the other are the things which will be like his Word with respect to similarity, and the things which came into being according to free will.<sup>12</sup>

God is thus set over against all other beings, including the Son, which exist only through an act of his will. (The Son's existence is therefore the consequence of a free act and not of necessity.) It is also only by will that God relates himself to his creatures, that is in the framework of divine command and creaturely response.<sup>13</sup> So it is that the Redeemer's work from creation through to crucifixion is interpreted as the conformity of his life and work to the Creator's will. In short, the relation of the Son to the Father is to be construed in terms of his perfect harmony with the divine will.

Expounded in this form the coherence and attractiveness of the Arian system becomes apparent. If, however, key elements of it are theologically inadequate, such as its view of the nature of salvation and the creaturely status ascribed to the Son, then it would seem that an alternative category must be used to describe Christ's relation to the Father. This was the lot that fell to the party led by the Alexandrian bishops Alexander and Athanasius.

### 3. The Athanasian alternative

Gregg and Groh give a summary of the orthodox response. "Believing the Arian picture of salvation blasphemous, orthodox representatives, introduced and took battle positions behind the word *homousios*, judging that this idea of identity of essence could alone differentiate the Son's divine likeness and unchangeability from that imitation (mimesis) which the faithful appropriate 'through virtue from keeping the commandments'."<sup>14</sup> Although the *homousion* was only understood as 'identity of essence' at a much later stage of the debate, Greg and Groh were right to appreciate the significance of the term in the orthodox reply to the Arian christology.

It is apparent that the *homousion* was not merely an element of the contemporary philosophical 'baggage' which unobtrusively attached itself to the Church's formulations, rather it was a concept consciously introduced into the christological discussion to safeguard what was believed to be the vital concern of the Christian faith, that is, the Son's essential divinity. Athanasian soteriology required a divine Christ if incorruptibility and immortality were to be imparted to men. Sin had affected man's nature making it 'alterable', only the 'unalterable' divine nature could transform man's nature, setting it free.

Good reason then that the Lord, who ever is in nature unalterable, loving righteousness and hating iniquity, should be anointed and Himself sent, that, He, being and remaining the same, by taking this alterable flesh, 'might condemn sin in it,' and might secure its freedom, and its ability henceforth 'to fulfil the righteousness of the law'...<sup>15</sup>

However, the notion of the Son's divinity was susceptible to various interpretations. Salvation itself was generally understood as a form of divinisation and believers were commonly identified as *theoi*. How in this context was one to differentiate the true divinity of the Son from the participation of the divine nature experienced by all Christians? For if Christ was divine only by participation he could

not deify others.

For it is not possible that He, who merely possesses from participation, should impart of that partaking to others, since what He has is not His own, but the Giver's; and what He has received, is barely the grace sufficient for Himself.<sup>16</sup>

By conceiving of the Son's relation to the Father in terms of the essence of the Father, the Council of Nicea brought a certain conceptual clarity to the notion of the Son's distinctive divinity. The Son was held to derive his being not from the Father's will but from his essence, as a human son does from his father, or a fountain does from the stream, to use Athanasius' favourite metaphors. This idea is neatly summarised by Christopher Stead in his book *Divine Substance*:

...he derives from the Father by a process comparable to natural generation, as opposed to some process of 'making', like that of God's created works.<sup>17</sup>

But the expression which was most effectively to distinguish the christology of Athanasius and his party from that of the Arians was that of the Son being 'homousios' or 'of the same substance' as the Father. Although originally lacking the precise significance it was later to develop, the concept from the first clearly distinguished the Son from all created being. Even the conservative Eusebius of Caesarea conceded that the homousion meant that:

...the Son is entirely unlike created beings, but completely like the Father.<sup>18</sup>

The ease with which the words 'essence', 'being' and 'nature' began to be used interchangeably in this context suggests that the meaning of the homousion was not inextricably linked to or dependent on one precise philosophy of being.<sup>19</sup> It is, therefore, I believe quite wrong to understand the concept as wholly dependent on an Aristotelean theory of substance. For we have seen that the term was first introduced to indicate the manner in which the Son derived from the Father. Stead maintains that:

...the vast majority of the texts examined above and elsewhere, including those from Athanasius' *de Decretis*, indicate that the phrase was not designed to make the directly ontological statement about the Son, that he is 'of' the ousia (i.e. rank, dignity, status) which is proper to the Father; but rather to show that he derives from the Father by a process comparable to natural generation, as opposed to some process of 'making', like that of God's created works.<sup>20</sup>

Once introduced, however, the concept was recognised as requiring that the same ontological description be given of both Father and Son. It took time to work through the implications of this with respect to the Father's monarchy and the Son's distinct subsistence. Nevertheless, from the first, the homoousion served as a powerful tool for removing any ambiguity attached to the notion of the Son's divinity, thereby clearly distinguishing his own divine status from that of believers, who merely participate in the divine nature.

Yet the question still remains, 'Did the 'homoousion' provide for the Church a theologically adequate description of the relation of the Son to the Father? Or was it too blunt an instrument to detail the delicate and complex outline of such a relationship?' Three rather different issues need to be considered in determining the theological propriety of its introduction.

#### a. The new difficulties it introduced.

Principal among these was that the homoousion appeared to threaten either the monarchy of the Father, or the distinct existence of the Son, depending on whether the 'sameness' of 'ousia' was interpreted generically or as a numerical unity. This brought into sharp focus the implicit difficulties of any trinitarian conception of God, which although eventually solved to the satisfaction of the Church, still remained something of an enigma even to the faithful. However, although the alternative Arian christology did not raise the question of a divine trinity, the exalted status given to Jesus the creature as the causal agent of all creation, did itself indirectly threaten the



absolute monarchy of the Father.

b. The Son as servant.

The Arians portrayed the Son as totally dependent on his Father for his authority and power; as needing the Spirit so as to live in obedience to his Father's will; as freely choosing the good; and as continually growing in knowledge and grace. The supporters of the homoousion either ignored or denied all of these things with respect to Jesus. Thus Athanasius argued against his reception of the Spirit;<sup>21</sup> held Christ to be unchangeable;<sup>22</sup> and opposed the idea that he advanced in knowledge or grace.<sup>23</sup>

c. The Son as divine.

As we suggested above, the conceptual clarity brought to the notion of the Son's distinct divine status was the underlying motivation for the introduction of the 'homoousion'. It was seen to be an effective tool to conceptualise the relation of the Son to the Father in a way which would secure his essential divinity and ontologically set him with the Father over against all created being. The Church's worship required such status for the Son, as did the Athanasian soteriology. It was also believed that the New Testament bore witness to this understanding of his relation to the Father. Having identified the divine status of the Son as the most crucial theological issue, the Church was eventually led to all but unanimously affirm the 'homoousion', even though important aspects of the Gospel picture of Jesus as God's servant were in danger of being effectively denied.

Is the 'homoousion' then, irreconcilable with the biblical portrait of Christ as the servant of God, who is wholly dependent on him, and is it therefore finally inadequate as a theological model of the relation of the Son to the Father?

After the defeat of Arianism at the end of the fourth century, the homoousion was so firmly embedded in the Church's theological

understanding that such a radical questioning of its adequacy was not seriously considered. In fact, it was not until the Socinian controversy of the seventeenth century that the debate was reopened and the possibility arose for these issues to be discussed afresh.

#### 4. The Socinians

Persecuted for their opinions in both Protestant and Catholic territories, the Socinians from all over Europe began to settle in Racov in southern Poland, where they flourished from the mid-sixteenth century till their banishment in 1658. From there they were to spread to Hungary, the Netherlands and England sharing their ideas through their numerous writings, the most famous and comprehensive being the Racovian Catechism.

The Socinians were similar to the early Anabaptists in the radical nature of their criticism of all the structures of the old religious order, discarding everything that they believed had no biblical warrant. They differed from them, however, in the high regard they developed for academic learning and the emphasis they placed on reason in matters of religion. At one time their academy in Racov had over one thousand students enrolled and a printing operation that published in a number of languages.<sup>24</sup>

The distinctiveness of their theology lay in their rejection of the doctrines of the Trinity and of the deity of Christ. These issues had not been central in the Reformation debate, for both Catholics and Protestants were generally agreed on their substance. Calvin had been in sharp conflict with Servetus who could be described as an early Socinian, but by and large the need had not arisen to defend anew the theology of Nicea and Chalcedon. This is why the interaction of clearly formulated Socinian ideas with orthodox theology in seventeenth century Europe is of particular theological interest. The homoousion was again being seriously questioned!

### a. Challenge to the Trinity

John Owen had some sympathy with the Socinian reaction against the complex trinitarian speculations of medieval scholasticism.

Their (the Socinians') great stumbling-block I look upon to be the horrible corruption and abuse of the doctrine of the Trinity in the writings of the schoolmen, and the practice of the devotionists among the Papists. With what desperate boldness, atheistical curiosity, wretched inquiries and babbling, the schoolmen have polluted the doctrine of the Trinity, and gone off from the simplicity of the gospel in this great mystery...<sup>25</sup>

The Socinian complaint, however, was not merely with the excesses of trinitarian theorising by the schoolmen but with the intrinsic irrationality of the doctrine even in its most basic form - that in God there is only one essence, but three persons.

...the essence of God is one, not in kind but in number. Wherefore it cannot, in any way, contain a plurality of persons, since a person is nothing else than an individual intelligent essence. Wherever, then, there exist three numerical persons, there must necessary in like manner, be reckoned three individual essences; for in the same sense in which it is affirmed that there is one numerical essence, it must be held that there is one numerical person.<sup>26</sup>

Using Boethius' definition of person as *naturae rationabilis individua substantia*, the Racovian Catechism argued that the trinitarian formula is itself a logical contradiction. For those, however, who were part of the orthodox tradition this was no new difficulty. The Cappadocians and Augustine in their trinitarian writings carefully defined 'person' so that a distinction of divine persons did not necessarily entail a division of the divine essence. Owen's own response to the Socinians was that the essence of each person is the same divine substance, this substance is one and the same although the persons are distinct.<sup>27</sup>

However, Owen was opposed in principle to defending a doctrine of the Trinity at this level. He believed there are two aspects to the

doctrine, firstly the 'revelation' of it, by which he meant that which is clearly indicated by the Scriptures.

Now, the sum of this revelation in this matter is, that God is one;- that this one God is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost;- that the Father is the Father of the Son; and the Son, the Son of the Father; and the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of the Father and the Son; and that in respect of their mutual relations they are distinct from each other.<sup>20</sup>

Secondly there is the explication of it, by which he refers to the exposition of the Trinity in the doctrinal formulations of the Church, which though not essential for faith, have yet a part to play in the edification of the believer.<sup>20</sup> We might say that Owen distinguished between a first and second order of theological explanation with respect to the trinity. Now his apologetic strategy was to avoid debate with the Socinians at the second order of trinitarian explication, and to contend only for what he referred to as the content of revelation.

We have not, therefore, any original contest in this matter with any, but such as deny either God to be one, or the Father to be God, or the Son to be God, or the Holy Ghost so to be.<sup>20</sup>

He argued that if the direct express revelations of the doctrine are confirmed, then their further explications will follow of themselves.<sup>21</sup> Let us consider what this means.

We suggested earlier in this chapter that the acceptance of the homoousion in the fourth century brought into sharp focus the implicit difficulties in the conception of the trinity. But can we not go further than that? Were not the parameters of the the trinitarian discussion actually determined by the doctrines of the monarchy of God and the homoousion of the Son and the Spirit? Owen suggested that once these 'first order' elements were allowed, the further explication of the doctrine would more or less follow of itself. The central issue of the debate, then, is not the precise details of trinitarian explication, but the 'first order' doctrines that form the foundation of it.

Therefore, Owen, intent on getting to the heart of the Socinian opposition to the trinity, chose to do battle with them on their understanding of the person of Christ. This was the 'king-pin' on which so much of the trinitarian question seemed to depend - the relation of the Son to the Father.

#### b. Son by adoption

The Socinians made a radical break with the theological tradition which for so long had interpreted the Son's relation to the Father in terms of the homoousion. They understood Christ's nature to be that of a man, mortal while he lived on earth but now immortal.<sup>32</sup> The Racovian Catechism makes it quite clear in what limited sense his nature might properly be spoken of as divine.

But if... you intend by a divine nature the Holy Spirit which dwelt in Christ, united, by an indissoluble bond, to his human nature, and displayed in him the wonderful effects of its extraordinary presence; or if you understand the words in the sense in which Peter employs them (II Peter i.4), when he asserts that "we are partakers of the divine nature," that is, endowed by the favour of God with divinity, or divine properties, - I certainly do so far acknowledge such a nature in Christ as to believe that next after God it belonged to no one in a higher degree.<sup>33</sup>

How then, did they interpret his sonship? What was the basis of his peculiar relation to the Father? Their exposition is based on four groups of biblical passages that refer to Christ as Son.

(i) He was the Son of God in that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." (Luke i.35) Christ's unique conception, apart from a natural father, entitled him to the name Son. This, however, did not imply that he was a son by nature. As Jonas Schlichtingius argues for them:

There are many sayings of Scripture which show that Christ is in a peculiar manner, and on an account not common to any other, the Son of God; but we may not hence conclude that he is a Son on a natural account...<sup>34</sup>

(ii) His sonship is understood in terms of his mission. "...what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son?'" (John x.36) The Racovian Catechism details the nature of that mission.

...(Christ) being in a most remarkable manner separated from all other men, and, besides being distinguished by the perfect holiness of his life, endued with divine wisdom and power, was sent by the Father, with supreme authority, on an embassy to mankind.<sup>35</sup>

(iii) Christ is designated 'Son of God' at his resurrection. In being raised by God he was "as it were begotten a second time; - particularly as by this event he became like God immortal."<sup>36</sup>

(iv) His exaltation and consequent heavenly rule qualify him to be called 'Son of God.' For by this dominion and supreme authority over all things he resembles and in some respect equals God. On this account Scripture uses of him such phrases as 'a king anointed by God' and 'Son of God'.<sup>37</sup>

In each of these accounts the Socinians were careful to exclude the idea that Jesus Christ was Son of God in essence or being. His sonship was to be understood in functional terms, that is in relation to his work or office and did not of itself suggest a divine status. However, as Jesus grew both in grace and experience of divine power, his resultant conformity to God meant that it was appropriate to call him God.<sup>38</sup> 'God', in this restricted and subordinate sense, is something that he became, rather than something he was by nature. Smalcus outlines this development.

Certainly, seeing that Christ was not such by nature, or in his conception and nativity, as he was afterward in his succeeding

age, he might justly on that account be called the 'adopted Son of God.'\*\*

In summary, Christ's sonship is to be understood in terms of his work or mission. However, in that he achieved likeness to God, particularly through his holiness and righteousness, it is appropriate to speak of him as having become God, or as being the adopted Son of God.

### c. Dependent on the Father

With this understanding of the Son's relation to the Father, the Socinians were able, as the Arians before them, to emphasise Christ's radical dependence on God. Such a relationship, they believed, was wholly incompatible with an understanding of the Son as 'homousios' with the Father. We survey their argument as it is outlined in the Racovian Catechism.

The Scriptures declare that all the status, power and authority that Christ possessed, indicating his divinity, are his not by nature but by "gift of the Father; and refer it to the Holy Spirit, with which he had by the Father been anointed and filled".<sup>40</sup> There is a consistent testimony that it was God who had 'highly exalted him' and 'put all things under him'.

Jesus himself ascribed all that he did, his words and his works to the Father. It is not to his divine nature that he refers his empowering but to the Holy Spirit. This leads the catechist to the conclusion "that the divine nature which some would claim for Christ must have been wholly inactive and useless."<sup>41</sup> Christ repeatedly prayed to God showing that he himself did not have a nature which would have made him the 'supreme God'. "For why should he have recourse to another person, and supplicate of him, what he might have obtained from himself?"<sup>42</sup>

He also frequently asserts that he did not come of himself but was sent by the Father, speaking as his Father commanded and always doing only his will.<sup>43</sup> Such a subordinate status is difficult to reconcile with equality of essence. Rather, Christ does not hesitate to affirm that

the Father is greater than he, emphasising their intrinsic inequality and on occasion even refers to the Father as his God.<sup>44</sup>

We see then, that the Socinians believed that the relation of Son to Father was one of absolute dependence and that this precluded the possibility of an equality of essence between them. As we have seen, they offered instead a rather different interpretation of sonship, formulated in terms of Christ's mission rather than his nature or substance. A divinity was ascribed to him on account of his holiness and high office, but he was always to be distinguished from the 'supreme God'.

These were the two major prongs of the Socinian attack on the homoousion. By demonstrating the inadequacy of that concept they believed they had effectively undermined the orthodox doctrines of Christ's divinity and the trinity, for the Church had no alternative conceptual framework by which these doctrines could be supported. That it was a formidable assault is apparent from the subsequent growth and wide-ranging influence of Unitarianism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>45</sup> It was also a contributing factor to the increase of a general dissatisfaction within the Church with the orthodox dogmas about Christ and the resultant determination to form a conception of Jesus more in keeping with the Gospel witness.<sup>46</sup> The question of interest to us, however, is whether it was both possible and necessary to defend the use of ontological language and concepts in explicating the person of Christ.

##### 5. Owen's response

In his *Vindicae Evangelicae* Owen wrote a comprehensive reply to the Socinian arguments, and thereby indirectly offered a defence of the homoousion. We begin by considering his response to their interpretation of Christ's sonship.



### a. The eternal Son

His intention was to show that Christ was a son by nature and that ultimately his relation to the Father must be referred to his eternal generation from the Father's essence. If this was established it would determine the significance of the sonship ascribed to Christ in his incarnation, mission, resurrection and exaltation and thereby undermine the Socinian interpretation of it as one which is *totally* explicable in terms of his office or role.<sup>47</sup>

Owen's intention was to defend the homoousion within the framework in which it was first introduced, that is, as an explanation of how the Son was derived from the Father. A major reason why the term 'Son' was favoured by the Fathers as a more appropriate designation of the second person of the Trinity than 'Logos' was that it included the notion of his natural generation from the Father, an idea which suggested both his equivalent status and also his subordination to him.

Owen offered a five-fold argument for this natural or essential sonship of Christ. Firstly the New Testament repeatedly emphasises that Christ is God's son in a quite unique sense. He is the true, proper, only-begotten Son of God. These terms indicate that Christ's sonship should not be understood as merely metaphorical, but that it is in some respect analagous to natural sonship.<sup>48</sup> In particular the emphasis on his being 'the only-begotten Son' suggests that there is a relation of nature or essence rather than merely an external role that he filled.

Secondly a contrast is made in Scripture between those who are sons by adoption, received by grace and favour, and the only-begotten Son. The eighth chapter of Romans is an example of this distinction.

...the apostle had before mentioned other sons of God, who became so by adoption, verses 15, 16; but when he comes to speak of Christ in opposition to them, he calls him "God's own" or proper "Son," - that is, natural Son, they being so only by adoption.<sup>49</sup>

But neither Arians nor Socinians were able, nor did they wish, to make such an absolute distinction between the sonship of Christ and that of believers in general. The Scriptural differentiation, then, between

the adopted sons and God's own Son, would seem to severely weaken their argument.

Thirdly the dignity ascribed to Christ requires an 'essential' equality with the Father. "(W)ith God, equality of essence can alone give equality of dignity and honour; for between that dignity, power, and honour, which belong to God as God, and that dignity or honour that is or may be given to any other, there is no proportion, much less equality..."<sup>50</sup> Owen believed that the equality of honour with the Father which is on occasion ascribed to Christ would be blasphemous apart from an equality of essence. c Athanas v a

Fourthly the Scriptures indicate that Christ has been begotten by a communication of the divine essence. One of the verses that he uses to demonstrate this is John v.26. "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself." Of this he remarks:

It was by the Father's communication of life unto him, and his living essence or substance; for the life that is in God differs not from his being.<sup>51</sup>

The homoousion is sometimes thought of as a static concept, but Owen here offers a very dynamic interpretation of it. For him the Son's derivation from the essence of the Father means that he has life in himself - that he too becomes a life-giver. This was precisely the point that Athanasius wished to defend by the homoousion: the Son's ability to give life to, or divinise, others, which was not possible if he, like all believers, merely participated in the divine nature.

Finally the biblical portrayal of Christ as the express image of the Father's person, or the image of the invisible God, indicated for Owen a likeness of nature or essence. "...Christ is the essential image of the Father, and not an accidental image, an image so as no creature is or can be admitted into copartnership with him therein..."<sup>52</sup>

To hurriedly award the victor's laurels to Owen after this brief summary of the debate on sonship might seem to overlook the breadth of

the Socinian counter-argument. They denied both Christ's pre-existence and his role in creation. They saw no absolute distinction between Jesus and other believers, for he was also an adopted son. That a sonship of function did not establish full divinity, was a point they would have willingly conceded to Owen, for this was precisely their own argument: Christ's sonship did not imply his essential divinity. The divine status that they did ascribe to him, in the manner of the Arians, was more of a gesture to the 'high christology' suggested in the New Testament, than a necessary part of their theology. They argued that Christ is 'a God', but not the 'supreme God'. In fact, their concept of divinity was so qualified that they believed it did not threaten a belief in the absolute monarchy of God. It is interesting that when Socinius had himself insisted that Christ ought to be worshipped, other leading Socinians were able to demonstrate that this was inconsistent with their principles.<sup>52</sup>

Clearly the Socinian theology was a well thought-through and superficially coherent system, but it was precisely this commitment to consistency which Owen used to reveal its manifest weaknesses. The universal practice of the Church in offering praise to Jesus as to God does have a New Testament foundation, but the Socinian theology was unable to account for it, and therefore the Socinians were compelled to disallow it. Perceiving that Christ shared fully in our human nature and conditions, they failed to acknowledge or adequately explain the Biblical portrayal of him as one who also had an absolutely unique relation to the Father. They were consistent in denying to the person of Christ any pre-existent status or role in creation, but the more internally consistent their exposition was, the less it accorded with the Biblical portrayal of the Son of God as the one through whom the universe was made and whose original status was such that he had to humble himself in order to take the form of a man. In conceding some sort of acquired divinity to Jesus they highlighted their central weakness, that is, that their interpretation of the Son's relation to the Father in wholly functional categories did not adequately account for the high christology of the New Testament. Owen summarises the distinction between their respective positions.

...and our difference with the Socinians herein is, - we believe that Christ being God, was made man for our sakes; they say, that

being only a man, he was made a god for his own sake.(I p.326)

The Socinians were, thereby, forced to conceive of divinity in relative terms. But this is an interpretation of Scripture which the Jewish and therefore monotheist world-view of the New Testament writers prohibits us from making.

Owen, we have seen, upheld the divine status of Christ by interpreting the relationship of the Son to the Father as a 'natural' sonship, that is one which implied that Christ was of the same essence as the Father. Our purpose in this discussion has not been to provide a defence of the Son's divine being, but to examine whether ontological categories are necessary in our description of the relation of the Son to the Father if we are to give an adequate account of his divinity. So far we have seen that both in the fourth and the seventeenth centuries it was the explication of Christ's sonship in terms of nature and essence, rather than mission or function, that was held by all parties as necessary to account for the Son having a divine status which was equal in dignity with that of the Father. Those who were opposed to ascribing this level of dignity to the Son were therefore compelled to deny that his relation to the Father could be expressed in terms of being or substance.

However, we have still to consider the second prong of the Socinian argument, that is, that the dependent role of the Son precluded his essential equality with the Father. It would seem that it was this that lay at the heart of their dissatisfaction with orthodox christology. Believing that the Gospels so clearly portrayed Christ as dependent on and subservient to the Father they could not allow the equality of status that a natural or essential sonship implied.

Earlier in the chapter we suggested that Athanasian christology failed to meet this difficulty, and simply neglected the Biblical portrait of Jesus as dependent on God. Was Owen's christology able to provide a more satisfactory solution?

## b. The Son as Mediator

Owen's argument as outlined in the last chapter is that, for the sake of men and in free obedience to the Father, the Word or Son of God assumed a human nature and thereby condescended to take the office of Mediator.

This Word was made flesh, not by any change of his own nature or essence, not by a transubstantiation of the divine nature into the human, not by ceasing to be what he was, but by becoming what he was not, in taking our nature to his own, to be his own, whereby he dwelt among us.<sup>54</sup>

The incarnate life is thus referred to the person of the Mediator, who is both continuous with the eternal Son of God and yet not to be simply and absolutely identified with him. Owen held that:

The person of the Word, or the eternal Son of God, may be considered either *absolutely* as such, or as *designed* in the counsel, wisdom, and will of the Father, by and with his own will and consent, unto the work of mediation between God and man.<sup>55</sup>

This 'double consideration' enabled him to explain how Christ, although as eternal Son equal to the Father, could nevertheless as Mediator be elevated in status and made the heir of all things. Thus in his exposition of the phrase "whom he appointed heir of all things" in Heb.i.2 he begins:

The Son, as God, hath a natural dominion over all. To this he can be no more appointed than he can be to be God. On what account he hath his divine nature, on the same he hath all the attributes and perfections of it, with all things that necessary on any supposition attend it, as supreme dominion doth.<sup>56</sup>

However, Christ's elevation in status cannot be referred simply to his human nature. "Nor doth this denotation of him respect merely the human nature; for although the Lord Christ performed all the acts of his mediatory office in and by the human nature, yet he did them not as man, but as God and man in one person, John i.14, Acts xx.28."<sup>57</sup>

Owen uses the title 'Mediator' to signify that person, and it is to him, as such, that all the privileges belong with which he is invested on account of his office. "Nothing, indeed, can be added unto him as God, but there may be to him who is God, in respect of his condescension to discharge an office in another nature which he did assume."<sup>58</sup>

Owen's christology therefore, while affirming the Son's essential divinity, acknowledges that in fulfilling the office of Mediator it is necessary for him to be equipped by the Father for his work, and after his resurrection it is proper to speak of him being given all authority and dominion, and made heir of all things. For in his role as Mediator Christ is totally dependent on and therefore subordinate to the Father.

The key principle underlying his thought in this exposition is that "inequality in respect of office is well consistent with equality in respect of nature". The Son and the Spirit, although of the same divine nature as the Father, both condescend to their particular offices in the economy of salvation. The subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father, which are indicated in these offices, does not entail any inequality of nature between the three persons.

We considered earlier how Owen held that the person of the Mediator was the 'principium quo' of the activity of both natures. This, we saw, allowed him to emphasise the reality of the religious experience of his human nature, as totally dependent on God and in need of the Spirit for growth in grace, holiness and power. Owen, therefore, had no hesitation in acknowledging the reality of Jesus' prayers to his Father, but would not grant the Socinian argument that this entailed an inequality of being.

Though the divine nature prayed not, yet he who was in the form of God, and humbled himself to take upon him the form and employment of a servant, might and did pray. The Godhead prayed not, but he who was God prayed.<sup>59</sup>

In summary, Owen's christology not only conceded but vigorously affirmed the radical dependence of the Son on the Father as he

condescended to the office of Mediator in the economy of salvation. However he held this to be quite consistent with the Son's possession of a nature which was *homousios* with the Father. Christ was both the natural son of the Father and yet wholly dependent on him. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive.

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to examine the legitimacy of Owen's use of the 'two nature' theory to explicate the person of Christ, particularly with respect to its dependence on ontological language and concepts. In order to do so we have examined the motivating factors and the theological implications arising out of the introduction of the *homousion* to the Church's christological discussion.

It would appear that the term allowed the relation of the Son to the Father to be conceived of as one of natural generation, that is, generation from the essence of the Father and so distinguished from a relation of obedience to his will. The Son was thereby recognised as having the same being or essence as the Father and as equal to him in dignity. The weakness of the theory was that it appeared to exclude the Gospel portrayal of Christ as one who was wholly dependent on God throughout the course of his life.

We outlined Owen's response to the Socinians as the debate over the *homousion* was opened afresh in the seventeenth century. Many of the same issues were raised, but whereas the Arians interpreted Christ's sonship in terms of his relation to the Father's will, the Socinians understood it principally as referring to the office he filled. In both cases all parties to the discussion were aware that to limit the relation of the Son to the Father to functional categories would undermine his unique status of equality with him, and that the concept of an ontological relationship was able to effectively preserve it. The significant new factor in the debate was the use made by Owen of the concept of Mediator, which allowed him to affirm the dependent status of the Son in the mediatorial office to which he condescended, while maintaining the essential equality of his being with that of the

Father.

We have not attempted to provide a defence for the belief that the person of the Son is equal in dignity to that of the Father, but merely to show that both in the Arian and the Socinian debate it was by means of ontological concepts that this status was effectively maintained. Owen also reminded us that it was the recognition of the Son's equality of status with the Father expressed in ontological categories that formed the ground of the classical trinitarian discussion. I believe he was right in implying that the orthodox Christian interpretation of God as Trinity would collapse apart from this understanding of Christ.

One of the characteristics of the modern period of theology has been the attempt to avoid the problems suggested by the use of ontological language. David MacKinnon in his study 'Substance in christology - a cross-bench view' provides a number of sophisticated defences for its role in christology, answering those who either oppose the place of so metaphysical an idea in theology, or conversely who hold that the concept has been shown in modern philosophy to be inadequate and believe that the notion of event is more primitive and therefore more useful as an ontological concept than that of substance. He argues positively that "the *homousion* gave men who mastered it a surer purchase-hold on the relations of simpler, more immediately moving, certainly profounder theological affirmations".<sup>80</sup>

Nonetheless, I have a measure of sympathy with those who were frustrated with orthodoxy's failure to give an adequate account of the Son's dependent status as servant of God and who, in finding the figure of the Saviour as given in the creeds to be "unreal, unimaginable, and untenable",<sup>81</sup> sought alternate categories, normally functional, by which to understand his relation with the Father. By this means they were often able to provide a complementary understanding of his person, emphasising his absolute dependence on God, the gradual growth in his self-consciousness that he was the Messiah, or his role as the great exemplar of the moral life. But these in themselves were equally deficient in their explication of Christ. They consistently failed to conceive of his relation to God in a way that made it appropriate for the Church to worship him as equal in status to the Father himself.



One important work which has attempted to maintain a high christology in terms of the Son's function alone is that of Oscar Cullmann in *The Christology of the New Testament*. His argument for Jesus' divine status is summarised towards the end of the book. "The Gospel of John, Paul, and Hebrews follow this idea of revelation through to its logical conclusion: *Jesus Christ is God in his self-revelation*."<sup>2</sup> Without necessarily agreeing with Cullmann's interpretation of the New Testament authors here, it seems to me that he has been unwittingly forced to introduce a concept reliant on ontological categories in order to establish his high christology. The underlying idea is that God's self-revelation entails the substantial presence of God himself, which is dependent on the theory that only God can reveal God. But this means that the divine status of Christ is not constituted by his revelatory action, but rather presupposes it. The lesson to be learnt from the Arian and Socinian debates is that functional categories cannot in themselves account for the Son having a divine dignity equal to that of the Father and that they consequently fail to provide a conceptual framework which justifies the praise offered to him by the worshipping Church.

Pr 11 pp

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:

"To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb  
be praise and honour and glory and power,  
for ever and ever!" (Rev.v.13.)

To conclude, the christology of John Owen helps us to understand why the person of Jesus Christ, considered in terms of his relation as Son to the Father, must be explicated in both ontological and functional categories; the concepts of the one cannot simply be reduced to those of the other. If the temptation to orthodoxy in the early Church was to neglect the latter, the converse now appears to be true.

The reader will also appreciate that although approaching the matter from the perspective of form rather than of content we have, by arguing that the Son's relation to the Father must be expressed in terms of both ontology and function, indirectly defended an underlying

assumption of this thesis: an adequate christology must incorporate the concepts of both incarnation and inspiration.

## NOTES to CHAPTER FIVE

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- 2 Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, ANF, volume III, 25 p.621.
- 3 Gregg and Groh, *Early Arianism - A View of Salvation*, SCM Press Ltd. (London, 1981), p.x.
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- 5 Ibid., p.56.
- 6 Ibid., p.4.
- 7 Athanasius, *Four Discourses against the Arians*, NPNF, second series, volume IV, III 24 p.407.
- 8 Gregg and Groh, p.114.
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- 10 Ibid., p.9.
- 11 Ibid., p.91.
- 12 Ibid., p.5.
- 13 Ibid., p.26.
- 14 Ibid., p.30.
- 15 Athanasius, III 51 p.336.
- 16 Athanasius, *Councils of Arimium and Seleucia*, NPNF, second series, volume IV, 51 p.477.
- 17 Cristopher Stead, *Divine Substance*, Clarendon Press, (Oxford, 1977), p.233.
- 18 Ibid. p.259.
- 19 Ibid., pp.257ff.
- 20 Ibid., p.233.
- 21 Athanasius, *Four Discourses against the Arians*, "If then for our sake He sanctifies Himself, and does this when He is become man, it is very plain that the Spirit's descent on Him in Jordan was a descent upon us, because of His bearing our body. And it did not take place for promotion to the Word, but again for our sanctification..." I 47 p.333.
- 22 Ibid. "Therefore reasonably the Apostle, discoursing concerning the bodily presence of the Word, says, an 'Apostle and faithful to Him that made Him,' shewing us that, even when made man, 'Jesus Christ' is 'the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever' is unchangeable." II 9 p.353.
- 23 Ibid. "If He advanced when He became man, it is plain that, before He became man, He was imperfect; and therefore the flesh became to him a cause of perfection, than He to the flesh....(What moreover is this advance that is spoken of, but, as I said before, the deifying and grace imparted from Wisdom to men, sin being obliterated in them and their inward corruption, according to their likeness and relationship to the flesh of the Word?) III 52,53 pp.421ff.
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- 25 Owen, *Vindicae Evangelicae; or The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated and Socinianism Examined*, Works 12, p.42.
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- 51 Works 12, p.189.
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- 54 Owen, *Christologia; or, A Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ*, Works 1, pp.46ff.
- 55 Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol.3, p.212.
- 56 *Hebrews* 3, p.40
- 57 *Hebrews* 3, p.40.
- 58 *Hebrews* 3, pp.40ff.
- 59 Works 12, p.246.
- 60 D.M.MacKinnon, '"Substance" in christology - a cross-bench view', in *Christ Faith and History, Cambridge Studies in Christology*, ed. by S.W.Sykes and J.P.Clayton, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 1978), p.291.
- 61 Berkouwer, p.22.
- 62 Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, second English edition, SCM Press Ltd. (London, 1980), p.325.

## VI

## THE SON AND THE CHILDREN

*An 'autokinetic' human nature*

## 1. The relation between the natures

In the last two chapters we have considered how Owen might defend the 'two-nature theory' of Christ's person both from a charge of incoherence and for the use it makes of substantial or ontological language.

But even when the 'two-nature theory' was widely adopted a major difficulty for christology still remained. For our survey of some of the classical christological expressions suggests that the Church, although dependent on this theory for a considerable period of time, nevertheless by and large failed to bring its perception of Christ as the incarnation of the eternal Son of God into a coherent relation to the Gospel portrayal of Jesus as a man inspired by the Holy Spirit.

What was the key step taken by Owen which enabled him to integrate these two rather different perspectives into one coherent christology? It would seem that it had to do with his understanding of the relation between Christ's divine and human nature. On the one hand, he emphasised that the eternal Son had assumed human nature into personal or substantial union with himself, on the other he argued that all direct divine activity on the human nature of Christ was that of the Holy Spirit. We suggested earlier that these two concepts can be considered as forming a 'master-story' summarised as:

The Holy Spirit renewed the image of God in the human nature which the eternal Son had assumed into personal union with himself.

This master-story or condensed narrative provides a suggestive and determinative framework which links together these two christological

ideas into one coherent structure, and thereby allows us to conceive of Christ in terms of both incarnation and inspiration.

The question of interest to us in this chapter is whether Owen's underlying thesis is justified. Other than in the actual assumption of human nature, is it proper to conceive of the Spirit, rather than the Word, as the divine agent acting directly on the humanity of Christ? Owen is quite aware of the difficulties confronting his position.

It may, therefore, be, and it is objected, "That whereas the human nature of Christ is assigned as the immediate object of these operations of the Holy Ghost, and that nature was immediately, inseparably, and undividedly united unto the person of the Son of God, there doth not seem to be any need, nor indeed room, for any such operations of the Spirit; for could not the Son of God himself, in his own person, perform all things requisite both for the forming, supporting, sanctifying, and preserving of his own nature, without the especial assistance of the Holy Ghost?"<sup>1</sup>

Yet, in spite of these objections, Owen realised it was necessary to take seriously the Biblical portrait of Jesus as a man annointed by the Holy Spirit, and we saw earlier how he was able to produce extensive testimony from the Scriptures that throughout his life it was the Spirit that formed, energised, sanctified, comforted, raised and glorified the man Christ Jesus. The corollary, however, is not so clear. Was Owen justified in arguing that, other than in assuming it to himself, the eternal Son in his divinity did not act directly or immediately on his own human nature, but only indirectly through his Spirit? Owen realised that to establish his position there was a need also to argue by the 'analogy of faith', that is from other theological truths which bear upon it.<sup>2</sup>

In evaluating the validity of his theory, then, let us begin by considering the christological difficulties involved in maintaining its converse, that is, that the divine Word or eternal Son determines the human life of Jesus directly or immediately, rather than indirectly by means of his Spirit.

## 2. The Apollinarian solution

The Arian debate focused attention on the status of the Word or Son of God. At the Council of Nicea it was acknowledged that he was of one substance with the Father and this was eventually recognised as a standard of christological orthodoxy. But long before the dust was to settle on that discussion the question of the Word's relation to what we here will simply call the humanity of Jesus began to surface. Athanasius outlines his understanding of it.

Now, the Word of God in His man's nature was not like that (of the human soul limited to the body); for He was not bound to his body, but rather was himself wielding it, so that He was not only in it, but was actually in everything, and while external to the universe abode in the Father only.<sup>3</sup>

Two or three ideas typical of Athanasius's christology are suggested here and it might be helpful to highlight them. The Logos or Word is the personal governing principle which provides and gives life to the whole of creation and his action with respect to his human nature is one aspect of this wider work, similar in some respects to that of the soul to the body. In fact Athanasius often refers to the body as the instrument of the Word which he here graphically portrays as being wielded by him. In all this the agent of Jesus' human nature is clearly the Word, while his humanity is merely the instrument through which he acts. Kelly aptly describes this relation: "...the Word for Athanasius was the governing principle, or *hegemonikon*, in Jesus Christ, the subject of all the sayings, experiences and actions attributed to the Gospel figure."<sup>4</sup>

However, with such an uncompromising conception of the eternal Son's determination of Jesus' life, some explanation was needed to account for the human frailties and sufferings which the Gospels attribute to him. Athanasius did so by simply ascribing all these to his flesh.

...in nature the Word Himself is impassible, and yet because of

that flesh which he put on, these things are ascribed to Him, since they are proper to the flesh, and the body itself is proper to the Saviour.<sup>5</sup>

Some things then are spoken of him as God and others of him as 'He that bore flesh'. Athanasius suggests it is a fairly straightforward matter to distinguish between these two areas. "For if we recognise what is proper to each, and see and understand that both these things and those are done by One, we are right in our faith, and shall never stray."<sup>6</sup>

This explanation does not fit as awkwardly with his original position as it might first appear, particularly if we remember that Athanasius viewed the relation of the Word to the humanity as similar to the Platonic and therefore dualistic understanding of the relation of soul and body. We simply have to recognise what belongs to each. The difficulty, however, arises when we consider Christ's frailties, not merely in his physical body or in his emotions, but in his intellect, will and spirituality. Athanasius' model will not allow him to ascribe these to the flesh for these are functions not of the instrument but of him who wields it. He is, therefore, forced to be less than fair with the passages in Scripture which speak of Jesus growing in wisdom and grace or lacking complete knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

This brief analysis of Athanasius' christology is instructive in that it highlights the inherent difficulty faced by any theory which would emphasise the Word's role in directly determining the humanity of Jesus. For if the Word is the governing principle of his life, what account are we to give of the human will, knowledge and spirituality of Jesus?

Apollinarius' answer was unambiguous, the Word in effect replaced these faculties in the life of Jesus. We would be unwise, however, to view this as merely a naive short-circuit of the christological problem. His handling of the issues was both sensitive and subtle. For soteriological reasons he was wholeheartedly opposed to the dualism suggested by any view that there were two principles operating in Christ. "The metaphysical framework from which Apollinarius (sought) to interpret the being of Christ (was) a picture of the substantial unity of man as a synthesis of body and soul."<sup>8</sup> He understood the



Logos to be both the directive principle of Christ's life and the life-giving energy of his whole physical being, resulting in one vital hypostasis or nature.

Apollinarius was both carefully and logically developing a tendency that was already present in Athanasius and other supporters of the Nicene Creed. But when what was implied by them became explicit in his writing and when a human mind was not simply neglected, but actually denied of Jesus, the Church reacted strongly. At the Council of Constantinople it was generally accepted that the manhood of Christ must be complete, a whole man with his own human mind or soul.

Historical theologians have described Athanasius' form of christology as being of the Word-flesh type in contrast to the Word-man type which emphasised that Christ's humanity possessed a mind or rational soul. One of the reasons this latter form triumphed in the christological debate was that it was more able to satisfy the demands of soteriology. The widely accepted theory of the atonement at that time understood the Son's assumption of human nature to be a means by which God renewed man's nature in general. Gregory Nazianzen's celebrated expression summarises the argument:

For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to his Godhead is also saved.\*

Clearly if the mind of man, which is the seat of impurity in him, is to be saved, it is essential that the human nature which Christ assumed should include a fully human mind.

Our interest in this discussion is with the functional relation between the Word or divine nature and the humanity of Jesus. In the fourth century the emphasis on the Word's immediate or direct determination of the human life of Christ inclined naturally towards Apollinarianism. However, the Church's reaction to this theory and its affirmation that Christ possessed a human mind did not mean that the Word was no longer considered as determining the human life of Jesus.

The 'communicatio idiomatum' although originally put forward as a linguistic explanation for the practice of referring the action of one

nature to the other, soon developed into a way of conceiving how the human nature was effectively and directly determined by the divine. Thus John of Damascus writes with respect to Christ's human will:

And we hold that it is just the same with the deification of the will; for its natural activity was not changed but united with his divine and omnipotent will, and became the will of God, made man.<sup>10</sup>

The result was that orthodox theology particularly in the East, although affirming that Christ was ontologically one with us lacking nothing that was human, yet implicitly denied that his human nature thought, learned and responded to God in a way that was continuous with our own. Almost without exception the Fathers would not concede that Jesus grew in knowledge or needed to pray for grace for himself. If the Word determines the humanity, acting directly upon it, the full functioning of the human nature is effectively denied. I believe C.E. Raven was by and large correct in his assessment. "Apollinarius can only be condemned by those who are prepared to allow that the whole Greek school from Justin to Leontius and John of Damascus is similar...since the divergences between them and the heresiarch are merely verbal and superficial."<sup>11</sup> Th , }

So far our discussion has been limited to the Patristic Age, but some of the same patterns are apparent in the christology of more modern times. As interest grew in the concept of man's personality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its 'core' was often understood as the centre from which his 'authentic' actions sprang. With this came a new form of Apollinarianism. The core of Christ's 'personality', his ego, was understood to lie in the divine Son rather than in his human nature and in this way the Word was conceived as the immediate determinative force in the 'personal' dimensions of Jesus' human actions. So Maurice Relton argued:

The Divine Logos was capable of being the Ego, not only of his Divine but also of His human Nature; because His Personality in virtue of its Divinity already embraced all that is most distinctive of a truly human personality.<sup>12</sup>

The theory found apparent support in a misunderstanding of the earlier theory of 'anhypostasia', conceiving of it in psychological rather than ontological terms, and possibly it was this that prevented many from seeing its more natural link with Apollinarius' position.

Quite different in content but encouraged by a similar impulse has been the concept of the 'kenosis' of the Son in the incarnation, when this has been understood as his self-emptying or laying aside of aspects of his divine nature. With the underlying assumption that the eternal Son must directly determine the human life, yet unwilling to divinise Jesus' human actions, theologians have found it necessary to argue that there is some voluntary limitation on the Son's divine attributes. Although the theory has come under widespread criticism, more subtle mutations of it continue to appear, for those who would uphold the doctrine of the incarnation see no other way for the Son to determine and yet not violate Jesus' humanity, even though this be at the heavy theological cost of 'humanising' the divine nature.

### 3. An alternative account

It would seem, then, that there are inherent difficulties in any theory based on the assumption that the Son directly determines the human nature of Christ. But is this the only alternative? As Gregory of Nyssa put before the adherents of Apollinarianism:

Was it necessarily the case...that two complete entities, divinity and humanity, could not coalesce so as to form a real unity? Or that the coexistence of two distinct volitional principles in one individual was inconceivable? <sup>13</sup>

In short, are we left with the unsatisfactory choice of the divinisation of man, or the 'humanisation' of God, in order to explain the incarnation, or can we overturn the assumption that the Son directly determines the human nature and allow rather that each nature operates according to its own characteristic properties, finding its unity in the one incarnate 'hypostasis' or person, so that the actions performed in each nature are in fact the actions of the one person

Jesus Christ? Leo in his celebrated 'Tome' indicates his favour for this latter alternative.

For each nature retains its own distinctive character without loss; and as the form of God does not take away the form of a servant, so the form of a servant does not diminish the form of God....Each form, in communion with the other, performs the function that is proper to it; that is, the Word performing what belongs to the Word, and the flesh carrying on what belongs to the flesh.<sup>14</sup>

And this, in essence, was the position upheld in the Definition of Chalcedon.

...the distinction of natures being in no way abolished because of the union, but rather the characteristic property of each nature being preserved, and concurring into one Person and one subsistence...<sup>15</sup>

A common error, I believe, in reading the Definition is to interpret its reference to the two natures statically rather than dynamically, that is, to see it as maintaining that Christ had a full complement of human properties, but that these did not necessarily operate in a human way. But what does it mean to affirm that Christ had a human will other than that he willed as a human? By 'the characteristic property of each nature being preserved', those who formulated the Definition surely intended to summarise the concept which had been more fully expressed by Leo in the phrase 'each form in communion with the other performs the function that is proper to it'. If this is so, a framework was given in the Definition of Chalcedon which allowed the humanity of Christ to be conceived as effective, operating according to its own characteristic principles rather than as directly determined by the Word.

We have argued that the Church did not in practice hold on to this insight, for its soteriology required only the existence rather than the full operation of a human mind or rational soul. The consequent development of the concept of *communicatio idiomatum* allowed this human mind and spirituality of Christ to be understood as so determined by

the divine nature that a true appreciation of Christ's humanity was effectively lost.

In the seventeenth century John Owen reaffirmed the concept of Christ's human nature as 'autokineton', that is as a self-determining spiritual principle, fully self-conscious and as creature open and responsive to God, rather than as immediately or directly determined by the Son. He held that:-

His divine nature was not unto him in the place of a soul, nor did immediately operate the things which he performed, as some of old vainly imagined; but being a perfect man, his rational soul was in him the immediate principle of all his moral operations, even as ours are in us.<sup>10</sup>

His christology, along with that of Chalcedon, thus forms part of what we have described as an alternate account of the relation of the divine and human natures in Christ. But how are we to assess its validity?

#### 4. The nature of Christ's humanity

It would appear from our above discussion that the argument for the Word's determination of the human nature of Christ resolves itself into a question concerning the reality of his humanity. The real point at issue is whether the experiences of the man Christ Jesus were continuous with our own? Did he pray, face temptation, depend on divine strength and encouragement, grow in knowledge and grace and struggle to live a life of obedience in a way which was not qualitatively different from the possibilities that are open to us? In short did he, as man, face God as we do? If he did it would appear that his human nature is not directly determined by his divinity, but has its own principle or centre of operation, experiencing and knowing God through the Spirit.

What arguments can Owen bring to bear to establish that Christ's humanity was indeed of this sort? We will consider two aspects of his soteriology and also his understanding of Jesus as God's revelation.

#### a. Jesus as our prototype

We have seen that Owen understood man's alienation from God as arising from his defacement of the divine image which he bore. This image included his moral likeness to God in righteousness and holiness; his ability to recognise and respond to God's glory in creation and also the power to obey him and thereby to live continually with him in a relation of love and trust.<sup>17</sup> A necessary aspect of his reconciliation to God, therefore, is the restoration to his nature of this lost image.

How are we to understand Christ's part in bringing about this renewal of God's image among men? Of particular significance to our present discussion is the passive role that Owen ascribed to Christ in this work, arguing that the divine image was first renewed in Christ's human nature, as a prototype of what God by his Spirit was to do in the whole Church. God's purpose, he held, is that Christ:

...might be the pattern and example of the renovation of the image of God in us, and of the glory that doth ensue thereon. He is in the eye of God as the idea of what he intends in us...<sup>18</sup>

This is an important concept and we need to pause and consider how well founded it is. It receives its impetus from his perception that the Christian life can be understood in terms of conformity to the person of Christ and that the Spirit is given to us for no other purpose than to unite us to him and make us like him.<sup>19</sup>

The great design of God in his grace is, that as we have borne the "image of the first Adam" in the depravation of our natures, so we should bear the "image of the second" in their renovation.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly there is widespread Biblical support for the idea that our spiritual renewal and growth in grace can be described in terms of our conformity to Christ.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to

another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Cor.iii.18)

Now Owen held that this transformation of the Christian into the likeness of Christ is in effect the restoration of the divine image in him. Such an identification was possible because of his interpretation of the divine image in terms of sanctification and of spiritual life. The Christian is therefore called both to conformity to Christ and also to put on a new nature created after the likeness or image of God (c.f.Eph.iv.23), for they are in essence the same thing.

Owen appears to be justified, then, in holding that Christ is the prime example for the Christian life and that assimilation to his likeness is to be identified with the renewal of the divine image in the believer. But has he any grounds for arguing that this divine image was first restored in Christ's own human nature so that his whole life was in effect the prototype of the Christian life? A passage which he finds particularly instructive in this matter is from the second chapter of Hebrews.

For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brethren...(Hebrews ii.10,11. RSV)

A sanctifying work is presupposed in Christ who thereby becomes a pioneer in the faith for other believers. As Owen argues: "It is Christ who sanctifieth believers; yet it is from God, who first sanctified him, that he and they might be of one, and so become brethren, as bearing the image of the same Father."<sup>21</sup> What God did in Christ he was later to do in us, and thus the source of our sanctification is common, the image we bear is common, thus we are truly brethren.

We have spent some time considering this concept of Christ as the prototype of the believer because it clearly has far-reaching implications for an understanding of his humanity. The man Christ Jesus as the object of the Spirit's sanctifying and renewing work must

have learnt and experienced grace as we do, knowing sanctification through suffering and finding God's help through fervent prayer. If he is truly our prototype and example then he too must have stood before God "in a genuinely human attitude of adoration, obedience, a most radical sense of creaturehood."<sup>22</sup>

We are examining whether Owen can establish that Christ's humanity was such that his experience of God was in no way qualitatively different from possibilities that are open to us. So far we have looked at the implications which arise from his understanding of Christ's passive role as the prototype of the Christian life. Let us now examine what may be learnt of his humanity from Owen's exposition of the active part Christ played in giving over his life to suffering and death.

#### b. Jesus as willing priest

Owen believed Christ's work as Mediator between man and God could be referred to three distinct offices or roles which he exercised with respect to the Church. As king he received a delegated authority from God to rule his subjects and to subdue his enemies. As prophet he was raised up by God from among his brethren to make known to the Church the divine will by teaching and instruction. But his office as priest, whereby he made atonement for his people, differs from the other two in that it is directed not towards men but towards God on behalf of men.<sup>23</sup>

God is, therefore, the object of Christ's priestly work. It is before him that Christ stands as our advocate and continues to make intercession on our behalf; and it is to God that he offered himself as a sacrifice. For the high priest is always chosen from among men to act on their behalf in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.(c.f. Heb.v.1) This means that although salvation should be considered, from first to last, as God's gracious and loving initiative in reconciling an alienated and helpless world, nevertheless the actual act of atonement must also be seen as an act towards God of one who is man. We will consider the nature of this act and its implications for Christ's humanity by briefly following one line of Owen's discussion.



He held that there was no value or efficacy in the sufferings and death of Christ considered in themselves:

For what excellency of the nature of God could have been demonstrated in the penal sufferings of one absolutely and in all respects innocent...?<sup>24</sup>

Its effectiveness can only be understood with respect to God's covenant to save sinful men, and it is in this context alone that these sufferings are made good and tend to God's glory. (XIX p.89) Similarly the efficacy of the sacrifice is related to the attitude of the offerer.

It is the mind, and not the matter, that gives measure and acceptance unto an offering.<sup>25</sup>

Owen wished to emphasise that it is Christ's manner and motivation in the giving over of his life that brings glory to God and value to his sacrifice. This motivation included his love to mankind and compassion to those caught in sin; his unspeakable zeal for the glory of God; his attitude of submission and obedience to his will; and his own faith and trust in God.<sup>26</sup>

But by recognising that Christ's attitude in laying down his life is an integral part of the efficacy of his death, Owen effectively undermines what we might call an Apollinarian view of the atonement. For if it does not merely consist in his physical death, but in the fear and the tears, in the faith and the prayer and in the submission of the will that led to it, then an active human mind and will are an essential aspect of that whole event. To substantiate his argument let us consider his exposition of the following passage from Hebrews.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. (Heb.v.7)

Owen holds that 'flesh' is used here to signify the frailties, weakness

and infirmities of our nature in which Christ shared throughout his life, but which here refers particularly to his last days when all his sorrows, trials and temptations came to a head. The preceding verses show that the prayers and supplications he offered at this time were an aspect of his priestly ministry. They should not be considered as 'petitory' to procure that which is good, but as 'deprecatory' to keep off or turn away that which is evil, as were those of the high priest when he confessed the sins of Israel over the head of the scape-goat in order that the curse of the law might be averted.<sup>27</sup>

But the priest is in sympathy with those for whom he prays, for he too is beset with weakness. Owen, therefore, understands the verse as referring directly to Jesus' agony in prayer at Gethsemane, and he argues that the torment experienced there can not be explained merely as the fear of a man facing a gruesome death. "Where, then, is the glory of his spiritual strength and fortitude? where the beauty of the example which herein he set before us?"<sup>28</sup> We must, rather, look for a deeper cause for the dreadful, trembling conflict which seemed almost to dissolve his whole being.

Owen believed it had to do with Jesus' awareness of God in his holiness and righteousness as the author and upholder of the law and his understanding of his own impending death in terms of the law's curse. (Gal.iii.13) It is this that caused his sense of spiritual desertion and separation from all comfort and joy in his relation with God the Father, and which culminated in his cry of dereliction from the cross.<sup>29</sup>

The inadequacy of any portrayal of Christ's passion as the suffering of God at the hands of men, or the identification of God with man's tragic condition, now becomes apparent. Gethsemane does not allow Christ's tribulations to be viewed so docetically. The central actor in that dark drama experiences spiritual separation from God and he does so with human fears and a human faith. The person of Christ is truly God and thereby value, dignity and efficacy was given to his passion, nevertheless it was in his human nature that he gave himself up, knew the agony of spiritual dereliction and tasted death.

Owen's theology is interesting because in it there is recovered an

appreciation of the full and active humanity of Christ. His exposition of Christ as a willing priest who lays down his life as an atonement for sin requires an understanding of his humanity as one which knew the full depths of spiritual desertion and dereliction by God. Yet if he was both man and God how could his humanity experience such a sense of separation from God? Owen answers:

And this dereliction was possible, and proceeded from hence, in that all communications from the divine nature unto the human, beyond subsistence, were voluntary.<sup>30</sup>

We are back where we began. The eternal Son does not immediately determine the humanity of Christ, the communication is 'voluntary' rather than 'natural' and is always through the Holy Spirit. A sense of divine desertion is possible for Christ as man in his suffering precisely because his experience of God is not immediate but is indirect and by means of the Spirit.

In this chapter we have been examining the validity of Owen's assertion that the eternal Son does not directly determine or operate on the human life of Jesus. On the one hand we have argued that its converse tended historically towards some form of either Apollinarianism or kenoticism. On the other we have seen how Owen's soteriology requires a view of Christ's humanity as operating according to its own principles, rather than as directly determined by the Word. His soteriology thereby provides positive support for his theory.

There is, however, an idea in contemporary theology which appears to radically undermine it. This is the conception of Christ as God's self-revelation, which was developed by Karl Barth. Let us briefly consider how damaging it actually is to Owen's position.

#### c. Jesus as God's revelation

The point at issue is whether Jesus Christ reveals God by his own divine nature or through his humanity as it is inspired by the Holy Spirit. The former is destructive of Owen's theory for it implies that

in revealing God, Christ's divine nature is the direct determining principle of his words and actions. This is the position that Barth affirms:

...the statement about Christ's deity is to be understood in the sense that Christ reveals his Father. But this Father of His is God. He who reveals Him, then reveals God. But who can reveal God except God Himself?<sup>31</sup>

The underlying concept is that revelation must be self-revelation and therefore only the divine nature can truly reveal God. In fact Christ's deity is conceived in terms of his revelation of God. Pannenberg is aware of the importance of this argument and maintains that: "The demonstration of the connection of Jesus' divinity with the concept of revelation constitutes one of Barth's greatest theological contributions."<sup>32</sup> I believe its significance in the world of ideas lies in the fact that it gave to the post-Enlightenment Church a way of conceiving the deity of Christ which did not appear to suffer from the epistemological problems that had discredited the naive objectivism of an earlier age.

Owen's understanding of Christ in terms of God's revelation is quite different as is apparent from his discussion of the opening verses of Hebrews.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in the last days he has spoken to us by his Son. (Heb.i.1)

There is both a distinction and a measure of continuity between the revelation that came through the prophets and that which was in Christ. The distinction has to do with the being and status of the person through whom the revelation is given and it is this that the author of the epistle goes on to develop at some length. The continuity arises from the fact that it is God who in both cases is the author of the revelation.<sup>33</sup>

Owen examines the idea that it is the Father and not the Son who is the source of the revelation. It indicates that God has so revealed his

mind to him so as to be said to speak to us in him. Owen sees it as a characteristic of the whole New Testament witness that it is from the Father that Christ heard the word and learnt the doctrine that he declared to the Church, it did not come from himself.

And this is asserted wherever there is mention made of the Father's sending, sealing, anointing, commanding, teaching him; of his doing the will, speaking the words, seeking the glory, obeying the commands of him that sent him.<sup>34</sup>

Now if the source of the revelation is the Father, how then does he reveal himself to the Son? For in his divine nature Jesus Christ, "as he was the eternal Word and Wisdom of the Father...had an omniscency of the whole nature and will of God, as the Father himself hath, because the same with that of the Father, their will and wisdom being the same."<sup>35</sup> It was clearly, then, not as the eternal Word that the Son was taught by the Father, but as he took the form of a servant.

The Lord Jesus Christ discharged his office and work of revealing the will of the Father in and by his human nature...for although the person of Christ, God and man, was our mediator...yet his human nature was that wherein he discharged the duties of his office and the 'principium quod' of all his mediatory actings, I Tim.ii.5.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, as Christ received the Spirit that he might in all holiness obey God, so also was he endowed with the Spirit beyond measure that he might be "the great prophet of the church, in whom the Father would speak and give out the last revelation of himself."<sup>37</sup> What distinguishes the revelation in Christ from that of Moses and all other prophets is "the infinite excellency of his person above theirs."<sup>38</sup> The person of the mediator, God and man, as the agent of the revelation gives to it its dignity and value, even though it was done through his human nature.

It is apparent from this outline that if Barth's conception of revelation is in essence correct then Owen's interpretation of the relation of the divine nature to the humanity of Christ, and consequently his appreciation of the radical creatureliness of Christ

in all that he does, is mistaken. Now it is rather unlikely that a major foundation of contemporary theology will be effectively discredited in the eye of the reader by these few paragraphs, nevertheless in defence of Owen's position we raise the following questions.

Firstly, how firm is the biblical foundation for the conception of revelation as self-revelation, that is, that only God can reveal God? Pannenberg, who upholds the idea, recognises that it is modern. "The exclusive use of the concept of revelation for God's self-disclosure goes back to German Idealism, especially to Hegel."<sup>39</sup> He concedes that the words in Scripture translated by 'to reveal' and 'revelation' do not have this meaning at all, but believes that the content of the idea can be found in the Old Testament 'word of demonstration' formulas "that designate the knowledge of Yahweh's divinity as the purpose of God in history".<sup>40</sup>

Clearly the power of the idea lies not in its biblical base but in its ability to provide a framework for conceiving of the divinity of Christ in a post-Kantian world. How would Owen respond to so pragmatic a defence of its use? It is worthy of note that in the apologetics of his own day the divinity of Christ was often derived from the miraculous nature of his ministry. Owen, however, did not believe it was possible to do this.

The naked working of miracles, I confess, without the influence of such other considerations as this argument is attended withal in relation to Jesus Christ, will not alone of itself assert a divine nature in him who is the instrument of their working or production.<sup>41</sup>

An important principle emerges. According to Owen it is not possible to simply read off Christ's divinity from his incarnate activity, whether it be his sinless life, miraculous ministry, supernatural birth, resurrection or, as in our above discussion, in his revelation of God. For although in his person he was both God and man, his work of mediation was carried out through his human nature. This meant there were no aspects of his activity where God, or the divine nature, replaced the normal operation of his humanity. In short if we reject

Apollinarianism there is no element of Christ's incarnate life which we can simply isolate as being that of God and not of man.

How then do we come to know the divinity of Christ? Owen held that it was by the Holy Spirit. It was the Spirit that bore witness to Christ "that he was the Son of God, the true Messiah, and that the work that he performed in the world was committed unto him by God the Father to accomplish".<sup>42</sup> Christ died an ignominious death and was believed by most to be an imposter. It was the Spirit's work by means of his small group of followers to testify of him through their words and through the signs which accompanied them and it is by him that faith is maintained in the world today.<sup>43</sup> It is the Spirit that convicts and reproves of sin, but it is also by him that the veil is lifted and we are able to see the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus.

We have argued that whenever the divine nature is considered as directly determining the humanity of Christ, some aspect of his human nature is either neglected or denied. This leads us naturally to our second question. How does Barth understand the relation between the Word of God, that is Christ as God's revelation, and his humanity?

Is the *humanitas Christi* as such the revelation? Does the divine sonship of Jesus Christ mean that God's revealing has now been transmitted as it were to the existence of the man Jesus of Nazareth, that this has thus become identical with it?<sup>44</sup>

Barth goes on to show why the answer must be negative. Jesus Christ the man is not to be identified with the revelation. His argument makes sense once we accept his interpretation of the concept of revelation. Nevertheless the breach implied here between the Word of God and Jesus the man can only be damaging for christology for it inevitably leads to the neglect of the historical life of Christ as the basis for our knowledge of God. Thus Barth argues:

Jesus Christ is also in fact the Rabbi of Nazareth who is hard to know historically and whose work, when He is known, might seem to be a little commonplace compared to more than one of the other founders of religions and even compared to some of the later representatives of His own religion....The veil is thick. We do

not have the Word of God otherwise than in the mystery of its secularity. This means, however, that we have it in a form which as such is not the Word of God...<sup>45</sup> (I 1 p.165)

With this Owen would have sharply disagreed. There is a suggestion in it that Jesus of Nazareth, the historical form of the Word of God, is secondary. We can be agnostic about the historical details of his life and relatively unimpressed by his person, nevertheless we are still called to offer worship and obedience to Jesus Christ as the transcendent Word of God. But Christ the Mediator is one person, not two. Our response to the Rabbi of Nazareth is our response to God's Son. Owen held that Jesus' historical life is commonplace only to those whose eyes have not been opened by the Spirit to recognise the glory of his person. The distinction lies in our perception, not in his reality. The humanity of his one person has ultimate significance for in it and through it God is made known to us and redemption is won for us.

We have structured our discussion in an attempt to undermine Barth's interpretation of revelation as self-revelation by indicating the insufficiency of its scriptural basis and some of the unhelpful implications it has for christology. It was necessary to do this if Owen's thesis was to be defended, for Barth's conception of divine revelation as the action of Christ in his divinity, does undermine Owen's theory that the eternal Son determines the human nature of Christ only indirectly and by means of the Holy Spirit. O

We believe, however, that Owen's position can and should be defended for it offers a coherent way of understanding the true creaturehood of the man Christ Jesus within an incarnational christology.

##### 5. The self-consciousness of Jesus

On the basis of Owen's theory it would appear that we are entitled to ask questions about the self-consciousness of Jesus as he is man. There might or there might not be sufficient material for New Testament scholars to provide responsible answers, but there does not seem to me



to be any compelling argument why the venture is either intrinsically impious or doomed to failure. If the physical body of Christ operated as ours does, what ground, other than incipient Apollinarianism, can there be for maintaining that his human mind or self-understanding was wholly different from our own? Although Owen did not explicitly deal with Jesus' self-consciousness, he was interested in the extent of the knowledge possessed by the incarnate Christ and the manner by which he attained it.

In his commentary on Hebrews he argued that Christ had in principle a complete knowledge of God and his will. But in practice this was not his to exercise either as a child or as an adult, but rather he grew "in all that wisdom and knowledge which the human nature was capable of...without destroying its finite being or variety of conditions".<sup>46</sup>

There seems no reason, then, to consider the functioning of Jesus' human self-consciousness as discontinuous with our own, forming and developing as he grew in his experience of himself, the world and of God. Rather, it was only in the content of this perception of himself that the distinction lay. Of Jesus' self-understanding we offer a tentative description, for although we are uncertain of the details, we believe such an outline is in principle possible to draw.

Through his experience of God, mediated by the Spirit, Jesus came to believe that he was living in a unique relation to the God of Israel, analagous to that of a son to his father. Linked to this there was a growing conviction that he had been commissioned by God to a work of ultimate redemptive significance among his people. The Gospels suggest that this faith in his distinctive relation to the Father required divine support and strengthening, the outstanding example of which occurred at his baptism when a 'voice from heaven' affirmed his divine sonship. There were also times when this faith was tested and challenged and the accounts of his temptation in the wilderness give a dramatic description of his struggle and final refusal to seek some explicit and external evidence which would prove to himself the reality of his relation to God. Prayer was thus a spiritual necessity for his own faith and for the successful completion of his mission. Suffering, as always, proved to be the sensitive but effective divine instrument by which his person was refined and developed into spiritual maturity.

P.T.Forsyth inquires:

Is it too much to press into the deeper meaning and condition of such growing obedience, and to say that as he did the deeper will he knew the deeper doctrine, his *grasp* of sonship also grew?(p.121)

How much he knew and when he came to understand it is an ongoing task for New Testament scholarship to explore, as is the investigation of the part played by the various Old Testament messianic concepts in his perception of who he was. For it seems to have been through the mediation of one or more of these conceptions that he came to believe that he had a personal history that went back before time. This does not imply that he suddenly had a universal knowledge of all reality, physical and spiritual, but rather that he identified himself with one who had come from the Father's side. It would be on the basis of this developed self-understanding that he found the personal authority to forgive men of their sins and offer them life in the kingdom which he taught was being inaugurated in and through his ministry. It would also have provided him a framework to understand the divine call or mission that led him finally to Jerusalem and death.

He was not suffering from religious delusion for the content of his self-understanding is known by the Church to be true, the person who argued in the streets of Jerusalem was not only a descendent of David, but was also his Lord - an idea that appears to have delighted the common people, although undoubtedly scandalising the religious leadership of the day.(Mark xii.35-37)

Neither was his experience that of a schizophrenic for the simple reason that the divine nature never suddenly 'broke in', leaving his human mind and will as a mere spectator of his actions. Rather, his human self-consciousness knew and experienced God always indirectly and by means of the Holy Spirit, for only in this way could it remain truly human.

Here lies our motivation for this excursion into the self-understanding of Jesus. If his knowledge of his own divine sonship flowed out of an active faith, (and how else can we interpret the wilderness

temptations?) and if his human self-understanding was an integrated and continuous reality, it would seem that Owen was correct in arguing that the divine Word determined the humanity of Christ only indirectly and voluntarily by means of the Holy Spirit, rather than immediately or naturally, in which case his thoughts and ideas would have been those of God.

## 6. Conclusion

We began by arguing that Owen's ability to hold together or integrate the two christological types which we have described as incarnational and inspirational was in large measure an outcome of his understanding of the relation between the divine and human nature of Christ. In particular its success depended on whether he was justified in his thesis that, other than in assuming it into personal subsistence with himself, the Son acted on his human nature only indirectly and by means of the Spirit.

As the discussion progressed we saw that the issue resolved itself into questions concerning the nature of Christ's humanity. Were the experiences of the man Christ Jesus continuous with our own? Did he stand before God as we do? Did being truly human mean not merely the possession of a catalogue of static human qualities, but also include acting and responding in a fully human way? If so it would suggest that the process by which Christ as man learnt of God was similar to our own religious experience, that is, it was mediated by the enlightening, encouraging, comforting, empowering and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

Now the positive argument of this chapter has been that Christ's humanity was indeed of this sort. His role as the prototype of the Christian life and the nature of his priestly office whereby he gave up his life on behalf of his people and knew separation from God, both point to the reality of his active humanity in a manner which the tradition has often overlooked. We also attempted to show that Owen was correct in holding that Christ revealed God, not immediately by his divine nature, but rather through his humanity as a man whom the Spirit

had specifically anointed that he might bring good news to the poor. Finally we argued that it was possible to describe Jesus' self-consciousness as one which was integrated and continually developing, and therefore of the same nature as our own in its operation if not in its content. In short we have argued from Owen that the experiences of the man Christ Jesus were continuous with our own.

The underlying assumption of the discussion has been that the integrity of Christ's human nature, understood in this active sense, can only be maintained if the divine Word is recognised as operating on it not directly or immediately, but rather indirectly through the Spirit. This assumption is based on the perception that our own experience of the Spirit does not violate the integrity of our humanity. For although every spiritual act that we perform has its source in God's wisdom and will and flows from the redemptive life and work of Christ as that life is effectively imparted to us by the Spirit, nevertheless our humanity is not bypassed or directly determined by the divine nature, rather our human mind, will and affections continue to function in a way which is appropriate to their own being. Therefore, if Christ's human experiences were in fact much like our own, it would appear that his human attributes were not merely the passive instruments for divine thoughts, decisions or feelings, rather, they would have always operated actively in a fully human way knowing, serving, obeying and glorifying God as we do through the Holy Spirit.

Negatively, we have argued that where the Word was held to directly determine the human nature of Christ, operating as the single subject of all his actions, there was always an incipient tendency to either some form of Apollinarianism or kenoticism. One way or the other the active and real humanity of Christ was inevitably neglected or undermined.

But if Owen is thereby justified in his thesis that the eternal Son determines or operates on his human nature only indirectly and by means of the Spirit, he has in effect established the link which holds together or integrates the two christological types which we have characterised by the concepts of incarnation and inspiration. For this thesis of his makes it possible for us to form a coherent 'master-story' of the form:

The Holy Spirit formed, sanctified and energised the human nature which the eternal Son had assumed into personal union with himself.

And it is this 'master-story' or condensed narrative which enables us to conceive how Jesus Christ can be considered as both the incarnation of the eternal Son of God, and also as one who is inspired and anointed by the Holy Spirit.

We need to consider one other major difficulty that confronts Owen's christology. It arises in connection with the clear distinction he makes between the action of the Son and that of the Spirit with respect to the human nature of Jesus. Is such a distinction justifiable? If it is, what are the implications for trinitarian theology?

An almost unchallenged principle of orthodox trinitarian theology has been that the external actions of the Trinity are indivisible. How then was Owen as part of that tradition nevertheless able to so clearly make this distinction between the action of God as Son and God as Spirit with respect to the human nature of Jesus?

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- 2 Works 3, p.160.
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- 4 J.N.D.Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, fifth edition, Adam & Charles Black (London, 1977), pp.285ff.
- 5 Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, III 34, NPNF, second series, vol.IV, p.412.
- 6 Ibid., III 35, p.413.
- 7 Ibid., III 51, pp.421ff.
- 8 Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition, vol.I, From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, E.T. by John Bowden, second edition, Mowbrays (London & Oxford, 1975), pp.330ff.
- 9 Gregory Nazianzen, *To Cledonius the Priest against Apollinarius*, NPNF, second series, vol. VII, ep. ci, p.440.
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- 12 H.Maurice Relton, *A Study in Christology. The Problem of the Relation of the Two Natures in the Person of Christ*, SPCK (London, 1934), p.227. P.T.Forsyth in his important book *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, (London, 1909) develops this idea. "But if we follow the New Testament as a whole and as a Gospel, we must think of the divine element as constituting the historic personality..." p.247.
- 13 Quoted in Kelly, p.296.
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- 24 *Hebrews* 2, p.89.
- 25 *Hebrews* 2, p.155.
- 26 Works 3, pp.177-179.
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- 28 *Hebrews* 4, p.503.
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- 33 *Hebrews* 3, pp.5ff.
- 34 *Hebrews* 3, pp.28ff.
- 35 *Hebrews* 3, p.30.
- 36 *Hebrews* 3, p.30.
- 37 *Hebrews* 3, p.30.
- 38 *Hebrews* 3, p.31.
- 39 Pannenberg, p.127.
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- 42 Works 3, pp.183ff
- 43 Works 3, p.184.
- 44 Karl Barth, I 1, p.323.
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## VII

## TRINITARIAN AGENCY

*The Son and the Spirit as distinct agents*

## 1. Our knowledge of God as Triune

As a faithful young Puritan minister John Owen used to visit his people in the parish of Fordham teaching both adults and children the basic doctrines of Protestantism from two catechisms which he himself composed.<sup>1</sup> In the larger one it is asked: Do we know God as he is? The answer is: No; his glorious being is not of us, in this life, to be comprehended.<sup>2</sup> The same concern is apparent at the end of the section on the Trinity. Question: Can we conceive these things as they are in themselves? Answer: Neither we nor yet the angels of heaven are able to dive into these secrets, as they are internally in God; but in respect of the outward dispensation of themselves to us by creation, redemption, and sanctification, a knowledge may be obtained of these things, saving and heavenly.<sup>3</sup>

Why did Owen so stress the inherent incomprehensibility of God even at this basic level of Christian instruction? One reason was his belief in the value of a religious sense of awe before the transcendent mystery of a holy God. We cannot see or comprehend God. "For, in itself, the divine nature is hid from all living, and dwelleth in that light whereunto no creature can approach."<sup>4</sup> As all our rational conceptions are swallowed up and lost when dealing directly with that which is absolutely immense, eternal, infinite, the inadequate knowledge we do have of God's perfections comes mainly by removing all imperfections. "What we deny of God, we know in some measure - but what we affirm we know not; only we declare what we believe and adore."<sup>5</sup>

However, it was also the Aristotelian or empirical temper of Owen's



epistemology that required a doctrine of God's incomprehensibility. He held that "our knowledge of things is more by their operations and proper effects than from their own nature and formal reason. Especially is it so in divine things, and particularly with respect unto God himself."<sup>6</sup> Therefore our inability to know God's nature is not only due to the infinite distance between the Creator and the creature but also due to the way in which things in general are known, that is not directly but through their effects, not immediately through intuition but indirectly through our experience of their activity. Owen's conception of a mediated knowledge of God was in sharp contrast to the epistemology of his major theological opponents. The Quakers claimed that the 'inner light' gave them an immediate access to God and therefore an intuitive knowledge of him, while the Socinians contended for a rationally based understanding of God's essential nature. Owen was vigorously opposed to both.

But as to the being of God, and his subsistence in the Trinity of persons, we have no direct intuition into them, much less comprehension of them.<sup>7</sup>

The subsistence of his most single and simple nature in three distinct persons, though it raises and enobles faith in its revelation, yet it amazeth reason which would trust to itself in the contemplation of it - whence men grow giddy who will own no other guide, and are carried out of the way of truth.<sup>8</sup>

The alternative epistemology proposed by Owen is that we come to know the nature of God through his effect on the world of our experience. He did not use such self-consciously empiricist language, yet he expresses the same idea.

But this God, invisible, eternal, incomprehensibly glorious, hath implanted sundry characters of his excellencies and left footsteps of his blessed properties on the things that he hath made; that, by the consideration and contemplation of them, we might come to some such acquaintance with him as might encourage us to fear and serve him, and to make him our utmost end.<sup>9</sup>

Although these characters of divine excellence placed upon the works of

creation and providence are limited and inadequate, in the person of Christ there is a complete image and perfect representation of the Divine Being and excellencies. (He is a complete image, not of all that God is, but of God in so far as He offers himself as the object of our faith, trust and obedience.)<sup>10</sup>

This is the ground of our knowledge of the Trinity. "In the person and mediation of Christ (which are inseparable in all the respects of faith unto him) there is made unto us a blessed representation of the glorious properties of the divine nature".<sup>11</sup> For Christ, in accomplishing God's will, makes known what God does for us, in us and towards us, and thereby brings to light the mystery of the Trinity, or the subsistence of the three persons in the unity of the same divine nature.<sup>12</sup>

Owen is aware that not all our knowledge of the Trinity can come in this way for the internal acts of the divine persons towards one another and the distinct, divine, external actings of each person are not known by any representations open to our experience but only by verbal testimony.<sup>13</sup> He also concedes that the Scripture, through which we now receive our knowledge, is a doctrinal affirmation rather than an actual representation of the nature of God. Yet he insists that the whole Scripture is built on this foundation, or proceeds on this supposition - that there has been a real representation of the divine nature unto us, which it declares and describes.<sup>14</sup> It is with these qualifications in mind that Owen holds our knowledge of the Trinity to be founded on real representations of the divine nature in creation, redemption and sanctification. Such an epistemology would have more sympathy with some modern attempts to derive the Trinity from the history of Jesus the Son, than with Augustine's search for trinitarian patterns in the human psyche.

## 2. The essence of the doctrine

How does this effect his exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity? It is well to remember that at that time it was under vigorous attack from the Socinians who held it to be contrary to reason and far removed from

a straightforward interpretation of Scripture, particularly in its dependence on abstruse philosophical terminology and concepts. These charges had been difficult to answer and the faith of many ordinary believers had been confused and shaken. It was to this need that Owen addressed himself in his popular and short work on the Trinity. His belief in the incomprehensibility of God and the manner of his self-manifestation, together with an awareness of the content of the current debate, led him to formulate and defend the doctrine from Scripture in a greatly simplified form, avoiding where possible the use of sophisticated and technical vocabulary.

Now, the sum of this revelation in this matter is, that God is one; - that this one God is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; - that the Father is the Father of the Son; and the Son, the Son of the Father; and the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of the Father and the Son; and that, in respect of this their mutual relation, they are distinct from each other.<sup>15</sup>

It was only the contents of this affirmation, rather than its further explication, that Owen believed to be necessary for faith and in need of vindication against its opponents and in this task he concentrated his effort. "We have not, therefore, any original contest in this matter with any, but such as deny either God to be one, or the Father to be God, or the Son to be God, or the Holy Ghost so to be."<sup>16</sup>

Yet he did acknowledge, somewhat reluctantly it would seem, that the explanation and further development of this basic affirmation was of some value for the protection and edification of the church.<sup>17</sup> The two areas in which he offers such an explanation, albeit briefly, concern the nature of God's unity and the distinction between Father, Son and Spirit.

"Now this oneness can respect nothing but the nature, being, substance, or essence of God. God is one in this respect."<sup>18</sup> Owen thus argued that there is one essential, divine nature, considered not only as a generic unity but as a numerical unity of substance. "This one nature, substance, or essence, being the nature, substance, or essence of God, as God, is the nature, essence, and substance of the Father, Son, and Spirit; one and the same absolutely in and unto each of them: for none

can be God, as they are revealed to be, but by virtue of this divine nature or being."<sup>19</sup>

As to the distinction within the Trinity Owen refers it to the three hypostases or persons, distinctly subsisting in the same divine essence or being. Following the Cappadocians<sup>20</sup> he defines a divine person as nothing but the divine essence, upon the account of an especial property, subsisting in an especial manner. Thus in the person of the Father there is the divine essence and being, with its property of begetting the Son, subsisting in an especial manner as the Father, and because this person has the whole divine nature, all the essential properties of that nature are in that person. The wisdom, the understanding of God, the will of God, the immensity of God, is in that person, not as that person, but as the person is God.<sup>21</sup> This last distinction is important. It means that none of the essential attributes of the Godhead are to be distinctively attributed to a particular person.

The conclusion of Owen's exposition is that each person having the understanding, the will, and power of God, becomes a distinct principle of operation; and yet all their actings 'ad extra' being the actings of God, they are undivided, and are all the works of one and the self-same God.<sup>22</sup>

It is apparent that even in this brief explanation Owen has been unable to avoid entering the complexity of the historical trinitarian discussion. A fuller account of his trinitarian thinking is revealed in his other writings where an explication of trinitarian doctrine is necessary for the adequate exposition of some of the central theological themes. The rest of this chapter will consider one aspect of this thinking, namely his resolution of the tension implicit in the dual affirmation of the paragraph above. 'Each person is a distinct principle of operation and yet all ad extra actings of God are undivided.'

### 3. *Opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*

Owen affirms the doctrine, integral to both Western and Eastern trinitarian theology,<sup>23</sup> that all external operations of the Trinity are indivisible. Every person "is the author of every work of God, because each person is God, and the divine nature is the same undivided principle of all divine operations".<sup>24</sup> The doctrine follows from a particular understanding of God's unity. The nature of God is one and the same, undivided in all the persons and yet this nature is the principle behind all divine activity. Such activity or works of God, being the effect of divine power which is essentially the same in each person, must therefore belong equally to each person.<sup>25</sup> He gives an analogy to illustrate the concept. "(I)f it were possible that three men might see by the same eye, the act of seeing would be but one, and it would be equally the act of all three."<sup>26</sup>

The difficulty facing this doctrine is the clear and repeated ascription by the Scriptures and the Church in its worship of various divine acts to particular persons of the Trinity. To account for this, use is made of the theological device of 'appropriation'. William Hill explains it succinctly: What is in reality a common prerogative of the trinitarian members is predicated of one alone to manifest his personal uniqueness in the Godhead.<sup>27</sup>

Owen details the basis on which such predications are made. There is a distinction, relation and order in the manner of subsistence of the divine persons and so in the undivided activity of the divine nature each person does the same work according to the order of their subsistence. Every activity of God, then, although generally assigned to each person, is particularly ascribed to the one whose characteristic property is manifested in it, or who in a particular way condescends to it. Hence to the Father are assigned the works of nature or the old creation; to the Son all divine operations related to the recovery of mankind by grace; and to the Spirit those works of God through which grace is made effective in us.<sup>28</sup>

However, the principle of appropriation leaves intact the underlying doctrine that: every divine work, and every part of every divine work, is the work of God, that is of the whole Trinity, inseparably and

undividedly.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4. Distinct principles of operation

The position outlined above reflects a trinitarian orthodoxy, which was accepted by and large without criticism by Owen. It is interesting, however, to examine whether this 'orthodoxy' is in fact consistent with some of the major areas in his theology.

##### a. The Spirit as a distinct person

In his treatise on the Spirit 'A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit' Owen intended to establish that the Spirit "is in himself a distinct, living, powerful, intelligent, divine person".<sup>30</sup> His central argument was that the persons of the Trinity are so distinct in their peculiar subsistence that distinct actings and operations are ascribed to them. In particular "there are the external acts of one person towards another...So the Father gives, sends, commands the Son, as he had condescended to take our nature upon him, and to be the mediator between God and man. So the Father and the Son do send the Spirit, as he condescends in an especial manner to the office of being the sanctifier and comforter of the church."<sup>31</sup> This manifest distinction in activity indicates for Owen a distinction of persons. But does not an unqualified doctrine of the indivisibility of God's external activity, as outlined above, preclude such an argument? How can an undivided activity demonstrate distinct persons?

This difficulty is highlighted in his debate with the Socinians who granted the divinity of the Spirit's activity, yet held that he is not a person but a quality in the divine nature, or simply the power that God puts forward for a particular purpose. Owen, however, maintained that:

He is not a mere instrument or servant, disposing of the things wherein he hath no concern, or over which he hath no power; but in all things he worketh towards us according to his own will.<sup>32</sup>

He argued, rather, that the Spirit is a person, for it is "he to whom all personal properties, attributes, adjuncts, acts and operations, are ascribed, and unto whom they do belong".<sup>33</sup> But as it stands a doctrine of the indivisibility of the external activity of God devalues the reality of the particular ascription of such acts and operations to the Spirit and would thereby vitiate his argument.

#### b. The Son assumes human nature

A similar problem arises in considering the incarnation of the Son. As the assumption of human nature is an outward act of God, Owen holds it to be an act of Father, Son and Spirit. The wisdom, power, grace, and goodness manifest in it are essential properties of the divine nature and are therefore the action of each person equally participant in that nature. "As unto authoritative designation, it was the act of the Father...As unto the formation of the human nature it was the act of the Spirit...As unto the term of the assumption, or the taking of our nature unto himself, it was the peculiar act of the person of the Son."<sup>34</sup> But the question of interest to us is, 'who actually assumed human nature, the Trinity or the Son? Owen's answer is clear. "(F)or the Father did not assume the human nature, he was not incarnate; neither did the Holy Spirit do so; but this was the peculiar act and work of the Son."<sup>35</sup> Yet can an external work of God be so divided?

How did Owen harmonise these apparently conflicting positions: on the one hand a commitment to the indivisibility of the external divine activity and on the other a theology which vigorously affirms the distinct personal agency of the Spirit and the Son?

### 5. Resolution

A seemingly insignificant passage in his discussion on appropriation provides a clue to his solution and gives an insight into the direction of his theology. In this passage he outlines a second reason, other

than their order of subsistence in the trinity, for assigning or appropriating certain acts of God to particular persons.

(The works of God are eminently assigned to one person) where there is a peculiar condescension of any person unto a work, wherein the others have no concurrence but by approbation and consent. Such was the susception of human nature by the Son, and all that he did therein; and such was the condescension of the Holy Ghost also unto his office, which entitles him peculiarly and by way of eminence unto his own works.<sup>36</sup>

Owen is indebted to John of Damascus for this key phrase, 'a work wherein the others have no concurrence but by approbation and consent'. But in that phrase the doctrine of 'opera ad extra sunt indivisa' is significantly undermined. For it admits a real distinction in divine activity, maintaining only the common approval of the persons. Let us look more closely at John's use of it.

John had been considering the unity of the divine action. "Further the true doctrine teacheth that the deity is simple and has one simple energy".<sup>37</sup> Yet he allowed an exception to this rule. "But quite distinct is all that pertains to the divine and benignant incarnation of the divine Word. For in that neither the Father nor the Spirit have any part at all, unless so far as regards approval and the working of inexplicable miracles which the God-Word, having become man like us, worked, as unchangeable God and son of God."<sup>38</sup> Was this an innovation by John? Hardly, for he had no ambition to do more than gather together and summarise the best theology of the Greek Fathers. He was here merely verbalising the accepted view that the Son was the distinct subject of the incarnate life. In fact he even allowed that in certain of Christ's divine acts Father and Spirit were also operative. Nevertheless, he had drawn attention to an obvious exception to the rule of the indivisibility of the external divine activity.

Owen capitalises on this exception, developing it to include not only the Son's assumption of human nature and all that he did in it, but also going an important step further by recognising a second divine activity in which the rule could not be strictly applied, and that was the condescension of the Spirit to his particular office.



As a result Owen's theology is able to treat of the Son in his incarnate work and the Spirit in the fulfilment of his office as the distinct agents of their own activity. The contradictions suggested above, in his exposition of the distinct personality of the Spirit in his office and the Son's assumption of human nature, do not in fact arise, for the doctrine of the indivisibility of God's external activity has been qualified in these two instances, requiring only the concurrence by approbation or consent of the other divine persons.

The above summary is a rather one-sided account of the resolution in Owen's theology of the dual affirmation: each person is a distinct principle of operation and yet all 'ad extra' actings of God are undivided. The latter was qualified in the manner described, but this resulted in a weakening of its strictures rather than an overthrow of its content. In fact Owen continued to affirm the indivisibility of the 'opera ad extra' as the background against which his discussion of the distinct activity of the persons should be understood. Naturally adverse to theological innovation, he cited John of Damascus to avoid the charge of novelty and by introducing the qualification as an aspect of the principle of 'appropriation', he somewhat disguised its modifying function.

## 6. Consistent?

Yet how consistent was Owen in affirming the indivisibility of the divine activity and nevertheless allowing that the Son and the Spirit fulfilled their respective offices acting as distinct agents? The whole question turns on the legitimacy of a distinction he made in the external trinitarian activity.

...we must consider a twofold operation of God as three in one. The first hereof is absolute in all divine works whatever; the other respects the economy of the operations of God in our salvation. In those of the first sort both the working and the work do in common and undividedly belong unto and proceed from each person.<sup>20</sup>

However in "those operations which, with respect to our salvation, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do graciously condescend unto", a distinction is apparent in the activity of the persons. For instance the incarnate Son, in his office as mediator, is not considered without qualification as divine, but as subordinate to and dependent upon God. His activity in that office is that of an agent distinct from the Father. However in the Son's work, *asarkos*, he acts absolutely as God and his work is in reality indivisible from that of the Father and Spirit, even though it is ascribed as appropriate to the different persons.

Now if it is legitimate to make a distinction between the Son considered as a divine person absolutely, and as he has humbled himself and condescended to the office of mediator, then Owen would appear to be justified in applying the same principle to the Holy Spirit in his condescension to his own particular role or office in the economy of salvation.

In short the indivisibility of the external divine operations applies to the trinitarian persons only as they are considered as divine persons absolutely and not as they condescend to their particular offices in the work of our salvation. Owen's position here appears to me to be quite consistent.

## 7. Strictures on the tradition

Through this analysis Owen overcame a real impasse in traditional trinitarian thinking. James Mackey has drawn attention to nature of the problem and I summarise his argument. When the 'homousios' was applied to the Spirit, the Cappadocians argued for his equal divinity by showing that his activity can also be attributed to the other persons. This tendency increased till it yielded the principle formulated by Gregory of Nyssa: 'the oneness of their nature must needs be inferred from the identity of their operations'. Consequently it was extremely difficult to secure the distinctions between the Three by using the 'opera ad extra'. In fact, Mackey argues, the Cappadocians

were only able to consistently draw distinctions between the Three by using the older subordinationist model for the Trinity which the homoousite doctrine had been developed to replace.<sup>40</sup>

We can illustrate the development of the doctrine of the indivisibility of the activity of the divine persons by an examination of this idea in some of the Fathers. It would appear that it was initiated by Athanasius who believed that the divinity of the Spirit could be demonstrated through his unity with the Word. "For not that the Spirit is separate from the Word, but by being in the Word, he is in God through him."<sup>41</sup>

This conjunction of the work of the Spirit with the Son was further developed by Basil of Caesarea who held that "in all things the Holy Spirit is inseparable and wholly incapable of being parted from the Father and the Son."<sup>42</sup> Basil understood the Gospel account of the work of the Spirit in the life of Christ as demonstrating the conjunction of their activity.<sup>43</sup> The 'homoousion' had already been established for the Son, and so by closely linking the Spirit's activity with that of Christ, it was believed that his deity could be likewise secured.

In similar fashion Gregory Nazianzen sought to prove the Spirit's divinity from his relation to the life of Christ.

But now the swarm of testimonies shall burst upon you from which the Deity of the Holy Ghost shall be shown to all....Look at the facts:- Christ is born; the Spirit is His Forerunner. He is baptized; the Spirit bears witness. He is tempted; the Spirit leads Him up. He works miracles; the Spirit accompanies them. He ascends; the Spirit takes His place.<sup>44</sup>

Yet in this exposition the action of the Spirit is only closely linked to that of Christ, they are distinct agents doing the same sort of work. The principle was still to be formulated which made their action totally indistinguishable. Gregory of Nyssa lead Cappadocian thought towards that critical next step.

Suppose we observe the operations of the Father, of the Son, of the Holy Ghost, to be different from one another, we shall then

conjecture, from the diversity of the operations, that the operating natures are also different.<sup>45</sup>

Difference of operation meant difference of nature. If the Son and the Spirit had the same divine nature their operations must be absolutely indivisible. This concept became a part of Western orthodoxy primarily through the work of Augustine, who further developed some of its implications.

Central in Augustine's exposition of the Trinity is his affirmation that, "the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as they are indivisible, so work indivisibly."<sup>46</sup> (It is interesting to notice that the argument has been reversed and now moves from the nature of God's being to the manner of his operation.) This theory, together with the principle of 'appropriation', is carefully used by him to interpret, what had become for him, some awkward passages in Scripture. One of these was Mark i,11 in which a voice from heaven said, 'You are my Son'. Was it the voice of the Father or the Trinity? His solution indicates the direction of his trinitarian thinking. "Not that the voice could be wrought without the work of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (since the Trinity works indivisibly), but that such a voice was wrought as to manifest the person of the Father only".<sup>47</sup> A unified action nevertheless manifests a distinct person. This is parallel to his understanding of the incarnation. "...just as the Trinity wrought that human form from the Virgin Mary, yet it is the person of the Son alone; for the invisible Trinity wrought the visible person of the Son alone."<sup>48</sup> Augustine thus held the divine action that led to the incarnation as indivisible. The trinitarian persons, then, never act distinctly on the world of our experience.

Augustine was also unwilling to grant reality to the 'ad extra' acts of the divine persons towards one another, as is illustrated in his handling of the Scriptural affirmation that the Father sends the Son. The sending of the Son, being a divine work, is an act of the Trinity and therefore also an act of the Son. It is only by appropriation that he ascribed it to the Father. "Since, then, that the Son should appear in the flesh was wrought by both the Father and the Son, it is fitly said that He who appeared in that flesh was sent, and that He who did not appear in it, sent Him."<sup>49</sup> Thus for Augustine and those within his

trinitarian tradition any relation between the divine persons which has respect to the economy of salvation is ruled out. Barth speaks for that tradition.

Can we really think of the first and second persons of the triune Godhead as two divine subjects and therefore as two legal subjects who can have dealings and enter into obligations one with another? This is mythology, for which there is no place in a right understanding of the Trinity as the doctrine of the three modes of being of the one God...<sup>50</sup>

This is the logical outcome of the doctrine of the indivisibility of the divine activity - the biblical witness to the reality of the relations between the Father, Son and Spirit in the economy of salvation can be relegated to the category of myth and therefore ignored.

#### 8. New possibilities

We suggest that this theory of the indivisibility of the divine operations, having developed and become part of the orthodox tradition, exercised a debilitating effect on theology in general and christology in particular. Let us consider briefly how Owen's theology, no longer wholly committed to it, differed in its directions and concerns.

His epistemology was clearly at odds with its presuppositions. His belief in a mediated, rather than an intuitional or rational knowledge of God, meant that the Triune nature of God's being could only be known through his action among us. Scripture bears witness to the experienced activity of God, and that is how in some measure we come to know his ineffable being. The economy reveals the nature of God. Thus Owen's epistemology followed the Cappadocians in maintaining that "we know our God from his operations",<sup>51</sup> but in direct contrast to them, he was aware that it is only by the distinction in this activity that we know him to be triune, for his work is a witness not merely to his unity but also to his diversity.

Owen's soteriology flowed out of his understanding of the dynamic inter-relationship between the divine persons in the economy. The Father's sending of the Son and giving of the Spirit, the Son's love of and obedience to the Father, the Spirit's glorification of the Son, together form part of that vibrant framework of divine interaction by which God's redemptive work is to be interpreted. A soteriology which would limit the reality of the divine interrelationship to the hidden, inner being of the Godhead, can only offer an impoverished exposition of the atonement in terms of the undifferentiated action of God.

One of the strengths of Owen's theology is his vital pneumatology in which he affirmed the distinct personality and work of the Holy Spirit. In contrast, an emphasis of the indivisibility of all external divine activity results in a loss of the distinctiveness of the Spirit's work, often understanding it as merely the immanent activity of a transcendent God or the immediate presence of a departed Christ. The persistent movement is towards a binitarian, if not monistic, conception of God.

This theory has also played its part in producing what we might describe as a 'one-sided' christology. If it is conceded that an adequate understanding of Christ must conceive of him as both the giver and the receiver of the Spirit; as God among us and as the prototype man of faith totally dependent on God, then Christ will need to be interpreted in both incarnational and inspirational categories, that is, in relation to the Son and to the Spirit respectively. If, however, the action of the Son and the Spirit are considered to be indivisible, the distinction between these two conceptions is lost and there is a tendency for one to dominate at the expense of the other.

This inability to so distinguish between the activity of the Son and the Spirit helps to explain the failure within the Church to consistently maintain both of these aspects of the reality of Christ. We have seen that the patristic age by and large witnessed the dominance of an incarnational christology and a neglect of the biblical conception of Christ as the one anointed by the Spirit and dependent upon him for grace in his own life and in his service for God. However, when Jesus' empowering by the Spirit was appreciated, as among

the Antiochenes, then the relation of the Word to Christ's humanity also tended to be understood in inspirational categories, such as indwelling, and the unity of his person, or doctrine of the incarnation, was endangered.

The strength of Owen's trinitarian theology is that, while affirming the essential unity of God, it recognised a real distinction in the action of the divine persons not only internally and reciprocally in the inner being of the Godhead as orthodoxy allowed, but also outwardly as they condescend to their particular roles in the economy of salvation. This trinitarian interpretation of divine agency unshackles a number of areas of theology from a theory which, it would seem, owes more to rational speculation than biblical affirmation for its development.

In particular, we have seen that it allowed Owen to distinguish between the Son's action in assuming human nature into personal subsistence with himself and the Spirit's work in forming, sanctifying and energising that nature. But it was precisely this distinction which enabled his christology to coherently affirm that Jesus Christ is both the incarnate Son of God and also a man of like nature with ourselves, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

## NOTES to CHAPTER SEVEN

- 1 Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen*, The Paternoster Press (Exeter, 1971), pp.17ff.
- 2 John Owen, *The Greater Catechism*, Works 1, p.471.
- 3 Works 1, p.473.
- 4 Owen, *Christologia: or, A Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ*, Works 1, p.45
- 5 Works 1, p.66.
- 6 Owen, *Pneumatologia: or, A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit*, Works 3, p.38.
- 7 Works 1, p.67.
- 8 Works 1, p.65.
- 9 Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hebrews 3, p.99.
- 10 Works 1, p.69.
- 11 Works 1, p.65.
- 12 Works 3, p.158.
- 13 Works 3, p.158.
- 14 Works 1, p.69.
- 15 Owen, *A brief declaration and vindication of The Doctrine of the Trinity: as also of The Person and Satisfaction of Christ: accommodated to the capacity and use of such as may be in danger to be seduced; and the establishment of the truth*, Works 2, p.377.
- 16 Works 2, p.380.
- 17 Works 2, pp.406ff.
- 18 Works 2, p.407.
- 19 Works 2, p.407.
- 20 The Cappadocians used, but were not confined by, the Aristotelian analysis of substance to describe the relation of person to essence in the Trinity. "The distinction between ousia and hypostasis is the same as that between the general and the particular; as, for instance, between the animal and the particular man." Basil, *The Letters*, NPNF, second series, volume VIII, ep.236 6, p.278. However, the fact that the essence came to be understood as a numerical and not just a generic unity meant that the Aristotelian framework was itself inadequate and needed to be supplemented with other models. One of these was the conception of the divine persons as 'so many ways in which the one indivisible divine substance distributes and presents itself' in various 'modes of coming to be'. See Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, fifth edition, Adam & Charles Black (London, 1977), p.266. Owen's definition is indebted to the Cappadocians for both of these perspectives.
- 21 Works 2, p.407.
- 22 Works 2, p.407.
- 23 See James Mackey, *The Christian experience of God as Trinity*, SCM Press Ltd. (London, 1983), pp.142-163.
- 24 Works 3, p.93.
- 25 Works 3, p.162.
- 26 Works 3, p.162.
- 27 William J.Hill, *The Three-personed God*, The Catholic University Press (Washington, D.C., 1982), p.283.
- 28 Works 3, p.93.
- 29 Works 3, p.94.
- 30 Works 3, p.67.
- 31 Works 3, p.67.
- 32 Works 3, p.201.
- 33 Works 3, p.69.



- 34 Works 1, p.225.
- 35 Works 3, p.160.
- 36 Works 3, p.94.
- 37 John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, NPNF, second series, volume IX, 10 p.12.
- 38 Ibid., pp.12ff.
- 39 Works 3, p.198.
- 40 Mackey, pp.149-152.
- 41 G.A.Egan, ed., *The Armenian version of the letters of Athanasius to Bishop Serapion concerning the Holy Spirit*, Studies and Documents, volume XXXVII, University of Utah Press (Salt Lake City, 1968), III 5 p.205.
- 42 Basil, *On the Spirit*, NPNF, second series, volume VIII, xvi 37 p.23.
- 43 Ibid. xvi 39 p.25.
- 44 Gregory of Nazianzen, *Orations*, NPNF, second series, volume VII, xxxi 27, p.327.
- 45 Basil, *The Letters*, ep.189 6 p.231.
- 46 Augustine, *On the Trinity*, NPNF, first series, volume III, I iv (7) p.20.
- 47 Ibid., II x (18) pp.60ff.
- 48 Ibid., II x (18) p.61.
- 49 Ibid., II v (9) p.50.
- 50 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. by G.W.Bromiley & T.F.Torrance, E.T. by G.W.Bromiley, T.& T.Clark (Edinburgh, 1985), IV i p.65.
- 51 Basil, *The Letters*, ep.234 1 p.274.

## VIII

## CONCLUSION

## 1. The problem of christology

How are we to understand the person of Christ? Why did he rise a great while before dawn to pray? Did he live as we do, a creature before God, totally dependent on the Father for his physical and spiritual well-being? Were his sufferings and his temptations of the same nature as our own? Was he in continual need of divine grace, comfort and empowering through the Holy Spirit? Is his life, his own growth in knowledge and grace, a pattern for each of us to follow if we would live to God?

A positive response to these encourages us to raise some rather different questions. Did the whole event of his life and death have ultimate significance for mankind's relation to God? Is he the one through whom creation itself will finally be redeemed and restored? Is there a sense in which he is the very source of life, the one who himself gives the Spirit to the Church. Is the Holy Spirit also his spirit, that is, the Spirit of Christ. In the light of our knowledge of him do we need to readjust our whole understanding of the very being of God? Is Christ in his own person the worthy recipient of our unconditional trust and worship?

This path of enquiry leads us to the heart of what I understand to be the christological problem - the attempt of the Church to give a coherent and meaningful account of Christ's person in the light of its affirmative response to both these sets of questions. The actual content of that response is perhaps best summarised in the formula used by Irenaeus.

...while He received testimony from all that He was very man, and that He was very God...<sup>1</sup>

This is the dual affirmation with which the Christian community has generally tried to come to terms in its christological reflection,

believing that any adequate explanation of the person of Christ must incorporate both concepts if it is to be true to the Gospel witness and if it is to be the basis of an adequate soteriology. Whether it will ever be able to do this wholly successfully is, I think, rather unlikely. Nevertheless even when painfully aware of its failure to bring to coherent expression the reality of him who is the object of its faith, the Church has continually felt impelled to move beyond the *vere deus, vere homo* in its confession and explanation of Christ. The motivation behind this has been not only the desire to make sense of the faith, but also the determination to defend it against distortion.

What patterns emerge in the various christological formulations that have arisen in this ongoing process? It is interesting that a number of theologians do offer a somewhat similar analysis of how they might be classified. Among them I find particularly helpful the pattern discerned by Norman Pittenger:

One group of Christians has tended to say that this person is God living and acting humanly. Another has tended to say that this person is the Man in whom God lives and acts.<sup>2</sup>

We have, however, used slightly different criteria to characterise the two forms of christology into which the various ways of thinking about Christ appear most naturally to fall. This we have done with the concepts of inspiration and incarnation. In the former Jesus Christ is interpreted as a man who is fully empowered by the Holy Spirit in his redemptive ministry and in his unique relation of dependence on God. In the latter he is understood in the light of the act of the eternal Son of God who in humility assumed human nature into personal union with himself and lived among us in the form of a servant.

Now these two christological types correspond roughly to the different aspects of Christ's person suggested by the two sets of questions we raised at the beginning of this chapter. At first glance they appear to be mutually exclusive. Can they, however, be coherently held together? In short, we are asking whether it is possible for christology to give a consistent account of Christ as the one who prayed to the Father and received comfort and strength through the Holy

Spirit, growing in knowledge and grace and yet also to recognise him as the incarnation of the eternal Son of God.

It has been the aim of this thesis to examine whether the christology of John Owen does in fact coherently incorporate both these perspectives.

What then were the salient features in Owen's exposition of Christ's person? The underlying framework of his whole interpretation is that of the incarnation of the Son of God. By this he did not mean the transformation of the eternal Son or Word into humanity, but rather the assumption by the Son of human nature into personal union with himself. With this careful use of words Owen safeguarded the integrity of the divine nature, God in his being remains God. Nevertheless the person of the Son does not merely enter into a relation with a human being, rather in taking to himself all the properties of human nature it is proper to affirm that he, that is the person of the incarnate Son, is a true man.

Although the resulting union is a consequence of the Son's volition, in that he freely chose to take the form of a servant, it is nevertheless a natural rather than voluntary union. The 'oneness' is a matter of essence or ontology rather of will or action. It is a hypostatic union because the person of Christ is one individuated or distinct entity, that is, one *hypostasis* or person.

So far Owen has adhered fairly closely to the type of christology developed by Cyril of Alexandria. He differed, however, in the way he was to maintain the integrity of both Christ's humanity and his divinity. If his person is not to be considered as a mixed or hybrid being, part God and part man, then both his human and divine natures, although inseparable, need to be recognised as in some sense distinguishable, each operating in accordance with its own characteristic properties. The *communicatio idiomatum* is used merely as a linguistic tool to explain why one nature is sometimes referred to as the subject of the properties of the other, but it does not imply any actual transference of properties between the natures.

What then is the functional relation between the human and divine

natures of Christ? Ontologically they are substantially united in one *hypostasis* or person, yet if they form two distinguishable principles of operation, how are we to understand their interaction? In short how does the divine Word lead, guide or determine his own humanity without undermining its integrity and turning it into a mere, passive instrument of the divine subject?

Owen's deceptively simple answer was that it was by means of the Holy Spirit. The significance of this idea both for christology in particular and for theology in general cannot be easily overestimated. It allowed him to conceive of the man Christ Jesus as one upon whom the Spirit was operative in every aspect of his life. The Holy Spirit formed his body; enabled him to advance in wisdom and grace; comforted him in trial; equipped him for his prophetic ministry; empowered him to perform wondrous deeds; sanctified his life; raised and glorified his body. In close harmony with the Gospel record Owen could affirm all the elements of what we have described as an inspirational christology, yet he was able to do so within the framework of an Alexandrian interpretation of Christ as the incarnation of the divine Word.

If the step which Owen took so as to be able to affirm both an incarnational and an inspirational christology is comparatively straightforward, the question of whether he was justified in so doing is far from clear. A number of general difficulties arising from his exposition spring immediately to mind. First, there is the question as to whether a christology which affirms the distinct operation of Christ's two natures is able to maintain successfully the unity of his person as the one subject of his incarnate life.

Developing a conception common among the Latin Fathers, Owen's strategy was to indentify the person or agency of the incarnate life with Christ in his office as Mediator, that is as the God-man. To do this he made a distinction between the person of the Son considered as incarnate, and considered absolutely, that is, as the second person of the Trinity. Such a distinction appears necessary if we are, in our explication of Christ, to be true to the Gospel account of his dependent and therefore subordinate relation to the Father as incarnate and yet also to maintain the ontological equivalence of status he has

with respect to the Father in his divine being. Owen often described the incarnation as the event whereby the person of the Son, remaining what he was, became what he was not. In that there is no transformation of the divine nature, the Son remains what he is. But in assuming human nature to himself the person, as incarnate, becomes what he was not, that is one who is both God and man.

Conceiving of the person of Christ in this way does not imply that he is some form of *tertium quid* or divine-human amalgam, for his person is known always in two distinguishable natures. As to agency, Owen considered the person to be the original principle or agent of all that is done in the incarnate life; the natures are the two immediate principles by which and from which the agent works; the actions are the effectual operations of either nature; the *apotelesma* or effect of his actions with respect to God and men relates to the person, the Lord Christ, he who is both God and man.

Owen's analysis here does present a problem with respect to the use of the word *person*. We now normally understand personal agency in the light of a psychological model of a human person. But this model is clearly inadequate to express the agency of one who is God-man acting through his two natures, even though it might have value in clarifying what it means for that *person* to be and act as a human. The confusion arises because of the ambiguous use of the word *person*, a fact that needs continually to be born in mind while reading Owen.

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A second difficulty which modern theology, in particular, has with Owen's christology is the use it makes of ontological categories in its interpretation of Christ. It is often held that nature language or the language of being is far too static to model the dynamic reality of Christ. Put in this form this was not a question which Owen was called to face directly. Nevertheless in his defence of the deity of Christ in the debate with the Socinians the central issue concerned the nature of the Son's relation to the Father, a debate which I believe does have a direct bearing on the place of ontology in christology. The Socinian argument, in short, was that the relation must be understood in terms of Christ's mission or ministry, that is in functional categories only.

Owen, however, argued that the unique relation of the Son to the Father and the high status ascribed to him in the New Testament writings could not be adequately accounted for in terms of his mission alone. Treading a path similar to that taken by Athanasius in his debate with the Arians, who considered the relationship as being founded on God's will alone, Owen upheld the argument that the Son was of the Father's essence, as suggested by the model of natural generation. The life that is in God does not differ from his being and thus in communicating his life to the Son there is an effective communication to him of the divine essence. "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself." (John v.26) God's essence is interpreted both dynamically and vitally, sharing in that essence means that Christ himself becomes the active giver of life.

Owen also sought to undermine the position of his opponents by showing that the efficacy of Christ's ministry is in fact dependent on the nature of his person or being. He draws heavily from the argument of the book of Hebrews whose principal aim is to establish the superiority of Christ's person to the angels, to Moses and to the Levitical priesthood, along with his close alliance to mankind, as the basis for proving the greater efficacy of his priestly sacrifice to that of the Mosaic order. The person, therefore, cannot be interpreted wholly in terms of ministry or function, for the efficacy of that ministry is itself dependent on the nature of the person. There were, for example, others before Christ such as Moses who...

...had as much power, and as great a presence of God with him, as any mere man could be made partaker of; yet was he not in his ministry the saviour of the church - nor could he be so any otherwise than typically and temporally.\*

Christ could effectively redeem the Church for, unlike Moses, he was in his person a son and not merely a servant, a sonship that consequently needs to be interpreted in ontological and not merely functional categories.

The third difficulty raised with respect to Owen's christology relates specifically to his central thesis - that other than in assuming it

into substantial union with himself, the divine Son acts on his own human nature only indirectly and by means of the Spirit. Can such an argument be justified theologically? Owen defends it by demonstrating that the Gospels refer to the action of the Holy Spirit all aspects of divine empowering in Christ's human life and experience. He makes no attempt, however, to answer the opposing position, that is, that the divine Son does directly determine or operate on his own human nature.

In defence of Owen's thesis, however, we have considered some of the weaknesses that arise from this alternative position, that is, that the divine Son does act directly upon his own human nature. It is dependent on the idea that there is one immediate determining principle in the incarnate Christ and that that is the divine Son or Logos. Such a theory, we have argued, tends naturally to either Apollinarianism, the implicit denial of an active soul or ego in the humanity of Christ, or kenoticism, the transformation or limitation of the divine nature so that the humanity is not overwhelmed by its operation.

In either case the integrity of Christ's active humanity appears to be threatened. The whole issue is thus transposed into a question concerning the reality of Christ's human experience. Did he stand as we do, a man before God, dependent on the divine Spirit for all aspects of his physical and spiritual being? Owen's soteriology, which recognises Christ's life to be a prototype of that of the Christian, requires that his experience of God be considered as wholly continuous with our own. But the passion of Christ must also be interpreted in terms of his active humanity. The awful sense of spiritual desertion and separation from God known by him at Gethasemane and Golgatha cannot be glossed over and treated docetically. Full weight must rather be given to the fact that the cry of dereliction was that of man in deep spiritual darkness sensing that he had been abandoned by his God.

The theory that the divine Son acts directly on the human nature and is therefore the immediate subject of all Christ's human actions, simply does not accord with the Gospel witness to the reality of Christ's human experience. Far better, it seems to me, is to consider the subject of the passion to be the person of the Mediator, the one who is both God and man, and who experienced all the darkness of spiritual dereliction in and through his human nature, a nature that always



operated according to its own characteristic principles. But if this is correct, it would appear that Owen was justified in his thesis that other than in the personal assumption of human nature, the divine Son operated upon it only indirectly and by means of the Spirit.

Fourthly, we consider the difficulty that Owen's christology raised for his interpretation of trinitarian agency. In keeping with the orthodox tradition he held that all the external acts of the persons of the Trinity were indivisible. Yet by regarding the trinitarian persons as distinct principles of operation, and in particular by distinguishing so clearly between the action of the Son and of the Spirit with respect to the human nature of Jesus, he appears to undermine this doctrine. Some of the apparent inconsistency is resolved, however, by his unobtrusive introduction of a theory which effectively modifies the *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*.

(The works of God are eminently assigned to one person) where there is a peculiar condescension of any person unto a work, wherein the others have no concurrence but by approbation and consent. Such was the susception of human nature by the Son, and all that he did therein; and such was the condescension of the Holy Ghost also unto his office, which entitles him peculiarly and by way of eminence unto his own works.\*

In practice this meant that Owen's theology was able to treat of the Son in his incarnate work, and the Spirit in the fulfilment of his office, as the distinct agents of their own activity. The theory is dependent on the distinction he made between the Son considered as a divine person absolutely and as he has humbled himself and condescended to the office of mediator, and the application of the same principle to the Holy Spirit in his condescension to his own particular role or office in the economy of salvation. It is only in the fulfilment of these roles that they may be considered as distinct agents.

The resolution of the problem of trinitarian agency is not explicit in Owen's writing, and he is hesitant to challenge openly the traditional formula, nevertheless the whole direction of his theology, and in particular his interpretation of the person of Christ, requires a

modification of the *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* in the manner outlined above.

It is apparent, then, that Owen did affirm an inspirational christology in the context of a doctrine of the incarnation. We have argued that he was able to integrate these two apparently disparate concepts through his quite original interpretation of the work of the Spirit as the basis of the interaction between the divine and human natures in the person of Christ. We summarised his theory in the following form.

The Holy Spirit renewed the image of God in the human nature which the eternal Son had assumed into personal union with himself.

In defending the coherence of Owen's christology in the face of the four areas of difficulty outlined above, we are not claiming that he was wholly consistent, nor that the problem of Christology has finally been solved. Firstly, the ambiguous way he used the word *person* and his ambivalent approach to the *opera trinitatis* are but two important areas of his work that need further development. Secondly, Christ as the object of our christological reflection must surely always remain a mystery who continues to defy adequate theological expression. Nevertheless, I believe the christology of John Owen does coherently integrate these two distinctive ways of understanding the person of Christ in a manner which is helpful for reflective Christian faith and significant for the christological discussion both past and present.

## 2. Owen and the coherence of Chalcedon

The Council of Chalcedon was summoned by imperial command during a period of vigorous christological conflict in the Church. The intention was to establish peace by drawing up a 'definition of faith' which all Christians in the empire would be called upon to accept. The theological task which faced the assembled bishops was to somehow mediate between two quite different types of christology, generally

known to us as Alexandrian and Antiochene.

It is not always appreciated just how distinctive these two forms of christology are. For instance, the central thesis of R.V. Sellers' book *Two Ancient Christologies* is ~~that~~ "that there is no fundamental difference between the Christological teaching of the Alexandrines and that of the Antiochenes".<sup>5</sup> He therefore regards the conflict as tragic and unnecessary and due in great measure to the antagonistic spirit existing between the opposing parties.

It seems to me, however, that Sellers has failed to discern how each of these christological types was a well thought-through, internally coherent system which appeared to exclude the alternative account. To illustrate this we refer to Sellers' own discussion. He gives a helpful summary of the principal weakness of Alexandrian christology.

Thus the principle that the manhood (of Christ) was allowed to go through its own laws is, in effect, surrendered: instead, we have a moral and intellectual growth which is only in appearance...in his desire to preserve the reality of the redemption, Cyril sacrifices the reality of the manhood: Christ may be the Representative Man, holding all men to Himself, but the redemption is not brought about by a Redeemer who is suffered to endure any real inward conflict.<sup>6</sup>

Sellers goes on to ask a vital question for soteriology. "How, then can Christ be in all points tempted like as we are if, as soon as temptation arises, the Logos steps in and uses His power to quash the human impulse?"<sup>7</sup> It is, however, in his final evaluation of such a christology that we are forced to disagree with him.

Yet one can exaggerate the extent of this weakness which Cyril shares with all the Alexandrine teachers, and it is well that we should see it as a flaw, though by no means a major flaw, in a doctrinal structure for which, in its entirety, we can, surely, have nothing but praise.<sup>8</sup>

How pervasive the influence of docetism must continue to be if a twentieth century theologian can consider as only slightly flawed a

christology which denies that Christ was tempted as we are? The Antiochenes not only recognised this practical denial of the active manhood of Christ as a gross distortion of the Gospel account of Jesus' whole life, but saw it as undermining their main soteriological interests, which were conceived in ethical terms around a doctrine of Jesus as the second Adam, perfectly obedient to the divine will and as the first fruits of a renewed humanity.

The point, often overlooked, is that the christology of the Alexandrians inevitably led to this effective denial of the active humanity of Christ. It was not their historic bitterness towards the Antiochenes, but the inner logic of their own system which seemed to require it. Cyril and Severus were very able theologians, and their interpretation of the hypostatic union as one which implied the direct determination by the divine Son of his human nature meant that they could not concede that Christ actually grew in knowledge and grace or was genuinely tempted.

In a recent and fairly sympathetic study on Severus, Iain Torrance reminds us that in the Alexandrine tradition the subject of the incarnate life is always considered as the divine Word. "There is an emphasis that God the Word is the sole subject throughout, but that somehow two concrete things (*pragmatata*) have come and remain together."<sup>9</sup> For Severus this meant that if Christ on occasion acted in a human way it was because the Word specifically permitted it, to demonstrate the reality of his humanity.

He (Severus) quotes Cyril against Theodore, saying that the Word incarnate "feared by dispensation, inasmuch as he *sometimes* allowed his flesh by dispensation to suffer the things which belonged to it, he did not preserve its propriety undiminished: for it is seen in many cases not to have suffered the things which clearly belong to its nature, for it was united to the Word, the Maker of nature".<sup>10</sup>

The Alexandrians, although affirming the presence of a real manhood, always struggled to account for the humanity of Christ's actions. It is only by special dispensation that his human nature ever acts in a human way. In the normal course of events his manhood does not suffer

those things which belong to its nature for it has been united to the Word.

Small wonder then that the Antiochenes so vigorously opposed such a christology. For them salvation depended on the manhood of Christ having itself overcome sin. Theodore of Mopsuestia argues:

If [the Man assumed] did not receive a soul, and if it was the Godhead that conquered sin, then what was effected can be of no possible advantage to us. The Lord's struggle would have been no more than gratification of the love of display.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, they affirmed a real and active humanity of Christ. How then do they explain the unity of Christ's person? It is in their understanding not a union of being or nature, but rather one of will or purpose. So Nestorius maintains:

...the union of God the Word with these (his body and soul) is neither hypostatic nor natural, but voluntary, as consisting in the property of will and not of nature.<sup>12</sup>

The union is conceived as forming one *prosopon* which suggests one appearance to an external world rather than the existence of one distinct individual subsistence. Nestorius argues for a unity of action rather than being. "...in actions He made Himself a likeness to will that which He [the Logos] wills, that there might be one and the same will in both of them and one *prosopon* without division."<sup>13</sup> It is apparent that the Antiochenes gave to *prosopon* a meaning quite distinct from that of *hypostasis*.

The doctrine of the one *prosopon* is not, therefore, to be taken as an equivalent for the later dogma of 'hypostatic union'. For Theodore, the one *prosopon* is indeed a *persona communis*: the outward unity of presentation which is the result of the Word's dwelling of the Man.<sup>14</sup>

The opponents of the Antiochenes were right in seeing that this use of *prosopon* provided an inadequate conceptual basis for safeguarding the integrity of Christ as one distinct entity. Harmony of will or action

between the Man and the Logos; the indwelling of the Logos in the Man as in a temple; unity of affections and a sharing of honour and dignity all fail to secure what the Alexandrians required, that is, the ontological unity of Christ's person. But this is precisely what the Antiochenes could not offer, for they had no way of conceiving how it might be affirmed without endangering the reality of Christ's human experience.

Therefore, in contrast to Sellers, we argue that Alexandrian and Antiochene christologies formed two internally coherent, distinct and inadequate, theological systems, between which a coherent integrating bridge had yet to be conceived.

How then are we to characterise the Definition of Chalcedon? Drawing on both traditions it presented in confessional form the elements necessary for an adequate christology, which included the substantial unity of Christ's person and the full and active reality of both his manhood and his Godhead. It is therefore a misunderstanding, I believe, to interpret it as providing the parameters within which a number of orthodox christologies are possible.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, there was no christology to hand which was able to incorporate coherently these central elements. Therein lay the Definition's essential instability and the theological reason why the controversy continued unabated in the centuries beyond Chalcedon with such tragic consequences for the unity of the Church.

What has Owen to do with all this? The reader will be aware from the way the discussion has been structured that it is our contention that Alexandrian and Antiochene christologies broadly correspond to the ways of thinking about Christ which we have earlier described in our exposition of Owen as incarnational and inspirational.

We have already seen that Owen was closely dependent on Cyril's christology in his exposition of the doctrine of the incarnation. But in what sense can Antiochene christology be conceived as inspirational in the way we have used that term with respect to Owen? In the introductory chapter we detailed how the recognition by Theodore of Mopsuestia of the humanity of Jesus in his fears and prayers led naturally to his acknowledgement of Jesus' need for the Spirit in his

daily life.

It was this man...and not the Divine Word, that needed the Spirit to justify him, to enable him to overcome Satan and work miracles, to teach him what he should do; and for all these purposes he received the indwelling of the Spirit at his baptism.<sup>16</sup>

This emphasis on the Spirit's action in all aspects of the life of Jesus the Man, including the energising power to act against foul spirits and perform miracles, was strongly opposed by the Alexandrians and anathematized by Cyril in his third letter to Nestorius. Theodoret, however, vigorously defended it,<sup>17</sup> illustrated how firmly the Antiochenes were committed to maintaining the full humanity of Jesus' actions and his continual need for the empowering action of the Holy Spirit in all that he did. It is true that they went on to stress a union of the Logos with the Man, but even this tended to take an inspirational form, which is apparent from the difficulty Antiochene christology always has in establishing a sufficient ground for any distinction made between the relation of the Son and that of Spirit to the Man Jesus.

Now it has been the argument of this thesis that John Owen not only affirmed, but by and large successfully integrated an inspirational and incarnational christology. If this is substantially correct and if we are right in interpreting Alexandrian and Antiochene christology in terms of incarnation and inspiration, then Owen's christology not only incorporated the essential elements of these classical streams of christological thought, but provided a coherent means of bringing them into some form of conceptual unity.

To do this he was indebted to the third stream that played a part in the confluence of christological ideas at Chalcedon, that is, the Latin tradition with its soteriological awareness that Christ be recognised as the Mediator, the God-man, who in his full manhood and divinity is effectively able to reconcile man to God. But more significantly, it was his pneumatology, his understanding of the Spirit's work as the dynamic unifying principle of Christ's personal activity, which enabled him to integrate successfully an Alexandrian and Antiochene

christology.

Consequently, the Definition of Chalcedon, sometimes regarded as an irrational but necessary compromise between these two systems of thought<sup>18</sup>, indirectly finds in the christology of John Owen its own coherent exposition, so important to it if it is again to be recognised as a "signpost against all heresies".<sup>19</sup>

Negatively, however, Owen's christology provides a critique of Chalcedon, highlighting its failure to posit the means of its own integration, that is, by a doctrine of the Spirit's work with respect to the person of Christ.

### 3. Coherence and modern christology

Has modern theology been able to bring together these two different ways of understanding Christ and so present a coherent explication of his person?

In his book *God was in Christ* D.M.Baillie gave a helpful analysis of the christological debate in the earlier part of this century. The discussion centred on the religious significance of 'the Jesus of History', by which Baillie meant "Jesus as he really was in his life on earth, which includes of course what he did and said, what He intended and what He taught".<sup>20</sup> Although general agreement had been reached in the theological world concerning the reality of the Lord's humanity, opinion diverged on the extent of our knowledge of his historical life and of the value of such knowledge for Christian faith.

It is helpful to consider the background to this debate. The rise of modern historical science during the previous century had led to a more 'critical' approach to the New Testament and "a new consciousness that it might be possible to get behind creed and tradition and gospel, to penetrate the mists of ecclesiastical dogma, and to find the simple historical truth about Jesus of Nazareth."<sup>21</sup> Amid all the perplexities and uncertainties of faith, here, in the historical Jesus, there appeared to be something plain and unambiguous. This, it was held, is



where faith needed to begin and only then to be led on to dogmas about Christ, for if "the original disciples came to regard Jesus as Messiah and Lord and Son of God, it must have been primarily because His human life and personality had made such an impression on them".<sup>22</sup>

Yet a two-fold reaction had set in against this straight-forward and persuasive way of approaching christology. Firstly, a new radicalism had emerged in the historical study of the Gospels, associated with the phrase 'form criticism', and based on the principle that the Gospels throw more light on the early Christian preaching and teaching than on what Jesus actually said and did. Serious doubt was therefore raised as to whether it was possible to get any significant 'hard' evidence of Jesus as he actually lived and thought, that is, apart from the theological interpretation in which the Church presented him.

Secondly, there had been a dogmatic or theological reaction to the christology which was based on 'the historical Jesus', and this had been most powerfully presented by theologians associated with a school of thought often known as 'the Dialectic Theology' or 'Theology of the Word'. Emil Brunner was a representative of their ideas.

Christian faith does not arise out of the picture of the historical Jesus, but out of the testimony to Christ....Faith presupposes, as a matter of course, *a priori*, that the Jesus of history is not the same as the Christ of faith.<sup>23</sup>

It is not merely that historical criticism is unable to reconstruct a reliable account of Jesus as he really was, but that the whole enterprise was believed to be misguided, for the concern of faith is with the biblical Christ rather than with the life of Jesus. Thus Karl Barth argued:

There is no reason why historico-critical Biblical research should not contribute to the investigation and exposition of this historical Christ of the New Testament, instead of...chasing the ghost of an historical Jesus in the vacuum behind the New Testament.<sup>24</sup>

This new school of thought tended, therefore, to be far more radical in

its historical approach than the earlier liberalism. Barth interpreted Jesus' human life not as a revelation but as a concealment of God.<sup>25</sup> Far "from having any superhuman kind or source of knowledge in the days of His flesh, Jesus did not, as He faced His passion, even succeed in seeing 'a frontier, a meaning, a future, in what He had to suffer'".<sup>26</sup> Thus the Gospel story of the life and character and teaching of Jesus is not of itself considered to be a revelation of God, other than in the Resurrection, the forty days before the Ascension and the occasional anticipation of this glory in the miracles.<sup>27</sup> J

In this light the debate concerning the significance of Jesus' historical life is seen to be not so much a question of historical method or of the reliability of the Gospel accounts, but rather a matter of christology. The gulf existing between 'the Jesus of history' movement and the 'Theology of the Word' owed its being to a different understanding of God's revelation of himself and of the nature of salvation, and consequently to a different perception of the relation of the divine and human in the person of Jesus Christ.

Baillie, although sensitive to the many weaknesses of 'the Jesus of history' movement, believed that the attempt to construct historically the figure of Jesus was of the greatest importance for Christian faith.

If there is no revelation, no 'unveiling', of God in the human personality and career of Jesus, but only a 'veiling'; if God in Christ is as much as ever a *deus absconditus*, not a *deus revelatus*; what are we the better of the coming of God in Christ? Where is the light that saves us, the knowledge that sets us free?<sup>28</sup>

The concepts of soteriology are interdependent with those of christology. Baillie therefore recognised that his best defence for the significance of the human history of Jesus was a careful explication of the person of Christ. Although he often referred in his exposition to the concept of paradox, his christology is not particularly distinctive and fits comfortably into one of the two standard ways of understanding Christ's person.

The relation of the divine to the human in Christ is held to be of the same type but in complete and perfect form as the divine indwelling in the believer. If the paradox of grace in which our actions can be attributed both to ourselves and to God "is a reality in our poor imperfect lives at all, so far as there is any good in them, does not the same or a similar paradox, taken at the perfect and absolute pitch, appear as the mystery of the Incarnation?"<sup>29</sup>

Baillie has developed what we would describe as an inspirational christology, characteristic of the adherents of the 'Jesus of history' movement. Jesus is a perfectly receptive man into whose life God breaks in with full revelation. Paradoxically his actions are both divine and human. Baillie's commitment to orthodoxy leads him to incorporate into his christology the concepts of both a glorified and a pre-existent Christ, but they fit rather awkwardly into his scheme. He might well have been more consistent if, like Schleiermacher, he simply discarded the concept of the eternal Son, for it does not appear to be essential to the structure of his christology.

The strength of his exposition lies in his recognition that Christ can be "regarded as in some sense the prototype of the Christian life...refusing to claim anything for Himself independently and ascribing all the goodness to God".<sup>30</sup> Such a view ascribes a high value to the details of the history of Jesus. How he lived in the world and before God, the social, ethical, political and religious dimensions of his personal history together form the model and goal of the Christian life for the believing community. They are in his person a revelation of the very nature of God and without them Christian faith lacks substantiation. This christological perspective allows Jesus' history to be considered not only as a paradigm for the Church's life of faith, but also as providing the decisive and necessary critique of her continual failure to reflect in practice the truth of the Gospel.

Karl Barth, on the other hand, had no concern in the defence of the historical details of the life of Jesus, his deeds and his sayings, for his own christological perspective did not recognise them as having final significance, thereby indicating how sharply he differed from the inspirational scheme to which 'the Jesus of history' school adhered.

Although it is notoriously difficult to classify neatly a work as rich and diverse as his, I do believe the thesis of Charles Waldrop's book *Karl Barth's Christology: its basic Alexandrian character* is essentially correct.

For Barth, Jesus Christ is essentially divine. As the act of God and also as the divine subject who acts in eternity and in time, he is directly identical with God himself. In the incarnation he becomes the bearer of human nature, which has no independent existence and is not a person in itself. He is not merely a human person who is related to God in a special way, but the all-embracing divine reality in which all men have their being.<sup>31</sup>

Although Barth affirms the reality of Christ's humanity he consistently regards the agency or the subject of the incarnate Christ in his mediatorial role as a divine being.

In a way different from Israel's prophets He is not there to receive and transmit the Word of the Lord, but he speaks Himself, in fact He is the Word. He accomplishes a plenipotentiary representation of God in which God Himself is the witness for man before Himself and the witness in man for Himself. He is not an instrument of divine action. He acts himself divinely and therefore as a true Mediator.<sup>32</sup>

But it is precisely here, I believe, that his christology is defective. If Jesus Christ's work of revelation and reconciliation is always seen as a divine act, albeit in a human form, then that particular human form with its own distinct history are not of final theological significance. Only a soteriology which is able to recognise that it is also as man, that is by human action, that the Mediator is required to reconcile men to God and that the human life of Christ is of itself a revelation of God, will take seriously the details of Jesus' human history.

The time has come to bring this discussion together. We have highlighted one important area of modern christological debate, that is, the discussion over the significance for Christian faith of the

history of Jesus of Nazareth to which the Gospels bear witness. We saw that the conflict between the two schools of thought was ultimately one of christology and concerned the relation of the divine and the human in the person of Jesus. It was, in short, a conflict between an inspirational and an incarnational way of understanding Christ's person, both of which, we have argued, are inadequate expressions of his whole reality.

Modern theology thus continues to be faced with essentially the same problem of christology which has confronted the Church since the Patristic Age. How are we to coherently hold together these two ways of understanding the person of Christ, each of which is necessary and yet of itself inadequate as a full expression of his reality?

A common temptation is to treat the problem as an unreal one. Thus it is often argued that a difficulty in understanding Christ's person only arises because the matter is treated within the framework of an alien Greek metaphysic; or that religion is being conceived in physical rather than ethical categories; or that static, ontological concepts have been allowed to replace the functional language with which the New Testament describes Christ; or that narrative is the only appropriate linguistic form for theological statement. The list goes on. The different prescriptions have in common the conviction that a change in method or underlying metaphysic will soon show that the problem of christology is unreal and will disappear if approached from the right perspective.

Yet surprisingly, in only slightly altered guises, incarnational and inspirational christologies continue to arise in different ages and within different philosophical world-views, whenever the Church finds itself reflecting seriously on the person of Christ. The problem is real and will not be superficially dismissed. The coherence or rationality of christology depends on somehow or other being able to bring together in a consistent manner these two distinct ways of understanding his person.

The argument of this thesis is that Owen did so through his interpretation of the Spirit's work in the humanity of Christ.

To the question raised at the beginning of this section as to whether modern christology has effectively been able to integrate an incarnational and inspirational christology we would have to answer, no, at least not as it was represented in the discussion over the significance of 'the Jesus of history'. Between the christological types of Barth and Baillie there was no successful link or bridge. Baillie's concept of Jesus Christ as the man perfectly open to the divine indwelling and will of God fails to allow for the transcendent otherness of Christ's person as God himself among us in human form reconciling us to the Father. Conversely Barth's understanding of the Word of God as the immediate or direct subject of divine revelation and reconciliation undermines the significance of the particular humanity assumed in the incarnation.

We saw earlier how Owen's christology could be conceived as a coherent integration of Alexandrian and Antiochene christology. Can we use his ideas in the same way to bring together the perspectives of Barth and Baillie? Unfortunately I think not.

'The Jesus of history' movement reflects a sensitive understanding of Christ as man in his relation to God, with which Owen would have been in deep sympathy. Yet it seems to be locked into a methodology which bars it from attaining the complementary perspective, that is, the conception of Christ as God himself among us in human form. While it is true that our knowledge of God properly begins with the person of Jesus as he was made known among us, christology, Owen would argue, must be shaped in the context of God's saving purpose to reconcile to himself men and women in a way which fully expresses the glory of all the properties of his divine being. Only a doctrine of the incarnation, that is, the recognition that God, in the person of the Son, has humbled himself and taken to himself true humanity can adequately account for the requirements of this soteriology. However, the determinative role that questions of epistemology are still allowed to play in the way the person of Christ is unfolded is a major barrier to the reemergence of such an incarnational christology among those who affirm the value of the history of Jesus.

On the other hand, the concept of Christ as God's self-revelation developed by Barth appears to exclude an inspirational christology

through its failure to take seriously the significance of the particular humanity of Christ. If he is to be the Mediator between God and man, Christ's saving action must also be fully human, that is, it must also be as man that he reconciles us to God and manifests the divine nature and will. The theory that it is in his divinity that Christ reveals God does not seem to account for the New Testament emphasis that Christ makes known one who is other than himself, a concept which is apparent whenever mention is made of the Father's sending, sealing, anointing, commanding, teaching him; of his doing the will, speaking the words, seeking the glory, obeying the commands of him that sent him. In his divinity as the eternal Word and Wisdom of God, the Son has no need to be taught of the Father, it is rather in his humanity that he is anointed by the Spirit so that he might bring good news to the poor and proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. But this is a perspective which is excluded by the interpretation of Christ's divinity in terms of revelatory unity.

We would argue, therefore, that a major reconstruction of christology is needed today if there is to be a coherent integration of these two ways of thinking about Christ. Our study of Owen suggests that the way forward is through a careful reassessment of the implications of the Spirit's work in the life of the incarnate Son. However, at present there appears to be an insufficient basis for a doctrine of the distinctive work of the Spirit in the humanity of Christ. The inspirational christology of Baillie provides no conceptual framework for distinguishing between the action of the Word in assuming human nature and that of the Spirit in empowering, sanctifying and comforting the person of Jesus. Likewise, although the theology of Barth is developed around a trinitarian structure, the enlightening and convicting role of the Spirit among men, whereby he lifts the veil of darkness and reveals the glory of God made known in the person of Christ, has in fact been largely assumed by the Word. For Barth it is the Word rather than the Spirit that is present in the Scriptures and in proclamation as the immediate agent of divine reconciliation. There does not appear to be enough space in his theology for a distinct doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the immediate principle of divine activity in the humanity of Christ.

In short, it would seem to me that modern theology is not sufficiently

trinitarian to be able to integrate successfully the two basic and recurring forms of christology which we have characterised by the concepts of incarnation and inspiration.

We have argued, however, from our study of John Owen that an integration of the concepts of Christ as the incarnate Word of God and as the Son inspired by the Spirit is possible. By incorporating them both, Owen's christology brings a measure of theological stability to the Definition of Chalcedon and also serves as a pointer to the trinitarian direction modern christology must take if its divisions are to be healed. But most significantly it offers to the children of faith the hope of greater coherence in their understanding of the person of Christ.



## NOTES to CHAPTER EIGHT

- 1 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV 6.7, ANF vol.I, p.469.
- 2 W.Norman Pittenger, *The Word Incarnate*, Harper (New York, 1959) pp.12-13, quoted by Charles T.Waldrop, *Karl Barth's Christology: Its basic Alexandrian character*, Mouton Publishers, 1984, p.21.
- 3 Owen, *Christologia: or, A Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ*, Works 1, p.86.
- 4 Owen, *Pneumatologia: or, A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit*, Works 3, p.94.
- 5 R.V.Sellers, *Two Ancient Christologies: A study in the christological thought of the schools of Alexandria and Antioch in the early history of Christian doctrine*, SPCK (London, 1954), p.202.
- 6 Ibid., p.104.
- 7 Ibid., p.105.
- 8 Ibid., pp.105ff.
- 9 Iain R.Torrance, *Christology after Chalcedon, Severus of Antioch and Sergius the Monophysite*, The Canterbury Press (Norwich, 1988), p.76.
- 10 Ibid., p.97.
- 11 Sellers, p.137.
- 12 Ibid., p.151.
- 13 Ibid., p.160.
- 14 R.A.Norris, *Manhood and Christ: A Study in the Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia*, Clarendon Press (Oxford, 1963), p.232.
- 15 See the article on 'Chalcedon' in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Ed. by F.L.Cross & E.A.Livingstone, second edition, Oxford University Press (Oxford, 1985), pp.262ff.
- 16 Theodore of Mopsuestia, quoted by H.B.Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the Ancient Church*, Epworth Press (London, 1912), p.260.
- 17 Theodoret, *Cyril's "Twelve Chapters" or Anathemas with Theodoret's Counter-Statements*, NPNF, second series, vol.III, p.30.
- 18 See the discussion by William Temple. "That the same being should be both God and Man in the sense in which those terms were commonly understood in the period of the Church's early history was not an unintelligible mystery but a demonstrable impossibility....The Church at Chalcedon virtually gave up the attempt to understand, while refusing to sacrifice either part of its apparently contradictory belief." *Christus Veritas*, Macmillan & Co Ltd. (London, 1954), pp.125ff.
- 19 A comment by Athanasius with respect to the Council of Nicea, quoted by D.M.Baillie, *God was in Christ*, Faber and Faber Ltd. (London, 1961), p.83.
- 20 Baillie, p.47.
- 21 Ibid., p.30.
- 22 Ibid., p.31.
- 23 Ibid., p.35.
- 24 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. by G.W.Bromiley & T.F.Torrance, E.T. by G.W.Bromiley, T.& T.Clark (Edinburgh, 1985), I ii p.65.
- 25 Baillie, p.17.
- 26 Ibid., p.18.
- 27 Ibid., p.37.
- 28 Ibid., p.49.
- 29 Ibid., pp.117ff.
- 30 Ibid., pp.129,117.

- 31 Charles T.Waldrop, *Karl Barth's Christology: Its Basic Alexandrian Character*, Mouton Publishers (1984),p.128.
- 32 Barth, I ii pp.105ff.

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